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DISCOURSES,
DOCTRINAL AND PRACTICAL;

DELIVERED IN

ESSEX STREET CHAPEL.

By THOMAS BELSHAM,
PASTOR OF THE CONGREGATION.

**"We are not as many, who adulterate the word of God, but as of
sincerity, but as of God, as in the presence of God speak we in Christ."
PAUL.**

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ADVERTISEMENT.

THE First Volume having been received by the public with the candour which was expected, has induced the writer to publish a Second Volume of Discourses, which he submits, with becoming diffidence, to the same tribunal.

T. B.

*Essex House,
April 30, 1827.*





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SERMON I.

IMPERFECTION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.

PART THE FIRST.

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For we know in part.

THE imperfection of human knowledge has been admitted and lamented in every age, and by those most, who have been acknowledged as the wisest and best of mankind. The most celebrated of the ancient sages^{es} professed that *he knew nothing*. And the greatest of modern philosophers, speaking of a friend, a man of very superior talents, who was cut off in the prime of life, was accustomed to say, "*had Cotes lived, we might have known something*:"* thus un-

* Sir Isaac Newton is reported to have said this of his friend Roger Cotes, who died, A. D. 1716, æt. 33.
—See *Biograph. Brit.*

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dervaluing his own great discoveries, which were the astonishment of his own age and of posterity. The apostle Paul, enlightened from above with a supereminent knowledge of the grace of God to mankind in the gospel revelation, a mystery which had been hidden from former ages and generations, and which none of the princes, or, of the sages of this world knew, with deep humility acknowledges the imperfection of his own knowledge of divine things. Now, saith he, in the present state of dim twilight, I *know in part*. And the confession thus frankly and openly avowed, by the great, the wise, and the good, we may all, without any impeachment of individual wisdom, adopt for ourselves, *We know in part*: We see as in a glass darkly. And this acknowledged limitation of human comprehension will supply ample materials for useful meditation.

Human knowledge is limited, both in its *extent* and in its *degree*.

First. The *objects* of knowledge to mankind are comparatively few.

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This is owing either to the *limitation* of the faculties, or to the *absence* and *remoteness* of the *objects* of knowledge.

By the *senses* only, we acquire a knowledge of the external world ; and the organs of sense are very limited in their number. No reasonable doubt can exist that more might have been added had it seemed expedient to the wise Author of human nature, which would have suggested conceptions of objects to which we are now as perfect strangers, as a man born blind is to light and colours.

And it would be arrogant to assert that the capacity of the human mind might not have been increased, and *other faculties* communicated, by which we might have been made capable of perceiving and contemplating a variety of intellectual objects which are now utterly unknown.

But the faculties which we actually possess might impart unspeakably more information than we in fact acquire by them, did not the brevity of human life, the slowness of apprehension, the limitation of our

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presence, and of the sphere of our observation, and many other circumstances, prevent the objects of which the mind is capable of forming some conception, from falling under its cognizance.

Secondly. Human knowledge is limited in its *degree*.

We know but little of the objects which actually occur to our notice, and to which we give the closest attention. There is, in fact, nothing, of which it can be truly said, that human knowledge is complete.

1. Our knowledge of *the nature and attributes of God* is very imperfect.

God is incomprehensible. Touching the Almighty we cannot find him out. The existence of a wise, a benevolent, and a powerful Cause, we learn from the works of nature, from our own existence, from the marks of contrivance in the universe, from the exquisite adaptation of means to ends, from the obvious preponderance of good over evil, and from the powerful, irresistible tendencies of things to a better and a happier state.

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But here our knowledge stops. When we attempt to form an adequate idea of an original, self-existent Being, imagination fails, and the faculties are absorbed and lost in the amazing contemplation. The nature of self-existence baffles the strongest intellect; nor can we form the least conception how the Divine Being exists, either in space or duration; what could prompt him to action; or in what manner he exerts his omnipotent energies. The best of the poor and feeble modes in which we can frame our conceptions of Deity is, by ascribing to God whatever is excellent in the human mind; whatever does not participate of weakness, of dependence, and of imperfection; and by ascribing those attributes to him in the highest degree. Thus we attribute to the Divine Being knowledge and power, wisdom, justice, and benevolence. But this, it is obvious, must be a very imperfect mode of conception; and God may possess attributes without number, of which man can form no idea, having nothing analogous to them in his own

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mind. Also the perfections of which we are able to form some obscure notion, which we actually ascribe to him, and which, indeed, make up our idea of God, exist in Him in a degree which far surpasses all human comprehension. Goodness, in man, is an attribute which prompts to the communication of happiness: and so is goodness in God. Otherwise, we talk without ideas when we ascribe this attribute to our Maker. But what the *nature* of that affection is, as it exists in God, and what the felicity which he derives from it, is wholly incomprehensible. It is higher than heaven, what can we do? it is deeper than the abyss, what can we know?—Great and transcendent Being! what art THOU? How infinitely do our conceptions fall short of thy boundless perfection! How much do we wrong thee in the sublimest thoughts that we can form concerning thee!

“The great FIRST—LAST! Pavillioned high he sits
In darkness, from excessive splendour born.
His glory to created glory bright,
As that to central horrors! He looks down
On all that soars, and spans immensity.”

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2. We know but little of the works of *nature*, and the *laws of the external world*.

Our senses inform us of the existence of external objects, of their several properties, of the various combinations of properties in the same substance, and of the powers which some substances possess of producing changes in others. But our knowledge soon stops in its career; and the properties to which it extends are only a few of the most obvious and glaring. The whole philosophical world has of late years directed its combined energies to the investigation of the affinities of natural substances, and discoveries have been made, which would astonish the philosophers of preceding generations. And no doubt the philosophers of a future generation will look back to those of the present day as comparatively infants in physical science: and will themselves likewise, in their turn, be regarded in the same light by a more enlightened posterity. But if we know so little of the *properties* of things, how much less can we understand of the *essences*, and the internal constitution of

8 *Imperfection of Human Knowledge.*

substances themselves. Some philosophers have even doubted whether matter has any existence at all : while others have maintained that nothing but matter does or can exist. The generality believe that matter is an extended, solid, and essentially inert substance, utterly incapable of active power. While some curious observers in modern times, have conceived that matter is an essentially active substance, and that all its phenomena are capable of being explained by different powers of attraction and repulsion.* What more flagrant proof can be required of the imperfection of human knowledge? The intellect of man only skims over the surfaces of things, and when it attempts to explore essences, it soon loses itself in an unfathomable ocean, where it can find no bottom.

The *external surface of the globe* is far from being fully known. The discoveries of modern times have indeed been very extensive. Much has been done in the last and present century for the improvement of geographi-

* Boscovich, Mitchell, Franklin, Priestley.

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cal science. The northern and the southern hemispheres have been visited, as far as human sagacity, skill, and courage could advance ; and islands innumerable, some almost equal to continents, have been discovered, and traversed, and even colonized : yet still much of the terraqueous globe remains unknown. The interior of the great eastern and western continents has hitherto been very imperfectly explored, and ages will probably elapse before the face, and climate, and natural divisions of those immense regions are distinctly ascertained.

The *vegetable productions*, and the *animal inhabitants* of the earth, are still less known than the distinctions of its external surface. The infinite varieties of the vegetable species, the curious organization of their parts, the principle of life, the manner of growth, the various uses of the different classes of vegetables, whether for building or clothing, for ornament or strength, for food or medicine, for preserving or destroying life, are in a great measure unknown : and though every day produces new discoveries, and

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adds something to this department of human knowledge, it still remains very limited, uncertain, and obscure.

Equally, or rather much more circumscribed, is our knowledge of the *animal creation*. Of the various tribes of animated being which inhabit the air, the earth, and the water, few comparatively fall under the cognizance of man. And of these few how little is certainly known ! The skilful professors of anatomy have discovered the general structure of the animal œconomy, and the use of many of the principal parts of the living system, so as to call forth the admiration of the contemplative mind, and to bespeak the adoration of the great Author of the curious frame, for the manifestation of his glorious attributes, in the wise contrivance of the organs of sensation, and in the exact adjustment of the structure of the animal to the element in which it lives, to the condition in which it is placed, and to its defence from the dangers to which it is exposed. But human sagacity is soon baffled when it attempts to explain the nicer move-

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ments of the animal machine, or even to examine into the structure of some of the nobler parts. The organization of the brain, the principles of life, of sensation, and of muscular motion, are all incomprehensible. They are subjects concerning which the knowledge of the philosopher scarcely exceeds that of a child. The same observation applies to those instinctive principles which are so conspicuous in the brute creation, and so essential to the preservation of life and the continuance of the species : in many cases so much above, and in many so much below the faculty of reason.

But if our knowledge is so imperfect of those objects which exist upon the superficies of the earth, and which, as it were, obtrude themselves upon our notice, what can we be expected to know of what is passing *beneath its surface*? The most stupendous excavations of human art penetrate but a very little way into what may be called the external rind of this capacious globe: and here we are soon lost in a world of wonders. By what tremendous explo-

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sion the shell of the earth has been broken and dislocated,* so that its once regular strata have been burst asunder and heaved in every possible direction, is a tale that no history can unfold, and a phenomenon which no philosophy can explain. Nor can human sagacity acquire any knowledge of the various and wonderful processes which are continually carrying on in the bowels of the earth, and of the formation of metals, marbles, and gems, and all other mineral substances, of which many have been discovered and applied to various important uses, and many more doubtless remain hitherto unknown.

The *ocean* is an abyss of unexplored wonders: abounding with an infinite variety of vegetable productions, and swarming with myriads of inhabitants of various magnitudes and powers, of different orders and degrees: some, perhaps, approximating to the human form, and to rational existence; others expanding to vast and enormous bulk, which nevertheless revel and sport at

* See Whitehurst's *Theory of the Earth*.



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their ease in the trackless regions of the waters, the greater part far beyond the knowledge and the control of man. In a word, wherever we turn our eyes new scenes of wonder present themselves to our regard. Every hill and every valley, every fountain and every field, every tree and every plant, every blade of grass, every drop of water, and every grain of sand, is pregnant with wonders too great for man to unfold.

That beings, who possess a knowledge so very contracted of the limited spot in which they are destined to reside, should be able to extend their views so as to form any just idea of *the system of worlds* with which they are surrounded, and even to enlarge their conceptions so as to obtain a glimpse of the admirable structure of the universe itself, is truly wonderful; and it is astonishing to think to what a variety of particulars, and to what great extent and certainty this sublime science is carried; so that the structure of the solar system, the number, the distances, the situations,

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the magnitudes, the motions, the mutual aspects and bearings, the direct and disturbing influences of the heavenly bodies upon each other, and the laws by which each and all of them are governed, are calculated with mathematical precision; and, from what is known, it is justly concluded that the immensity of the universe is proportionate to the immensity of the power, the wisdom, and the benevolence of its divine Author.

But when we compare the circle of light with the surrounding circle of darkness; when we contrast the little that is known with the immensity that is unknown, we soon shrink into our original insignificance, our pride is humbled to the very dust, and we, with shame, recall our eulogiums upon the extent of human knowledge.

The portion of creation to which our personal observation extends bears so scanty a relation to the unbounded universe, that, were the whole of it annihilated, it would no more be missed by an eye which could comprehend the whole,

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than a grain of sand upon the shore, or a drop of water in the ocean: and where human knowledge is most extensive, it is, in fact, little better than splendid ignorance. Reason and analogy teach that the planetary worlds are habitable like the earth, and that every fixed star is the sun and centre of a system of inhabited worlds; and no doubt every planet contains an immense variety of productions adapted to the nature, circumstances, and wants of its various inhabitants: but what these productions are, and what kind of beings inhabit the numerous systems which occupy, and, if I may so express it, which throng unbounded space, we may not presume even to conjecture. That the inhabitants of the planetary worlds are, in personal structure, and in the constitution of their nature, something similar to those which reside on the surface of this globe, we may, perhaps, be allowed to surmise, because the provision which is made for their accommodation, by the diurnal and annual revolutions of their planets, and by

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the supply of moons and rings to those which are most remote, would be useful to beings similarly constituted to mankind, if such resided there; but this is the utmost limit to which we are warranted to advance. All beyond is dim conjecture and midnight darkness.

3. All the knowledge which can be attained of *human nature* is very imperfect, and man is an inexplicable mystery to himself.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made, and there is nothing in the universe which is less known to man than man.

In the first place, we know comparatively little of the *structure of the body*. Though many things are already discovered by the observation of the philosophical anatomist, and the science of the human system is continually improving, much still remains to be discovered; and there are many important parts of the corporeal œconomy, the contexture and uses of which have hitherto escaped the most curious, accurate, and diligent research.

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The *vital motions*, upon the regular continuance of which existence depends, and which are wholly, or chiefly involuntary, are not understood. The contraction and dilatation of the heart, the heaving of the lungs, the circulation of the blood, the secretion of the fluids, the phenomena of digestion and nutrition, are processes of the most important nature, which are continually going on in the living man, essential to his existence, but independent on his will, and absolutely beyond the reach of his faculties.

The principle of *life*, whatever it be, or wherever it resides, eludes, by its subtilty, the most vigilant attention of the human intellect.

Still less can we comprehend the principle of *perception*, that principle which distinguishes the animal from the inanimate creation: the primary faculty of mind, which lies at the foundation of its sublimest powers, of imagination, of sensibility, of genius, of intellect, that which discerns all

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things is utterly incapable of discerning and comprehending itself.

Whether *perception* be a simple or a complex principle; whether it be the property of an extended or an inextended substance; whether of a material or an immaterial subject; whether it be the wonderful result of some curious organical structure, or a superadded and implanted principle; what its seat in the corporeal system; how it is connected with the body; in what manner it acts upon it, or is affected by it? These are questions to which no certain, and to a thoughtful and inquisitive mind, no satisfactory answer has yet been returned.

Whether the human being is an *uniform substance*, or whether, as is commonly believed, it be a wonderful *compound* of two different substances, which have no property in common, is a problem which few considerate persons will regard as completely solved.

Impressions upon the organs of sense

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excite correspondent *mental perceptions*, over which the mind has no power; and which it cannot, under the existing circumstances, refuse; which it cannot change, nor diminish, nor increase; but which will continue as long as the impression continues upon an organ capable of receiving it. This is the law of human nature. But how it is, that impressions upon the organs of sensation, producing certain motions in the sensory nerves, should thereby excite correspondent feelings in the mind, feelings to which they bear no resemblance, and for the production of which they appear to possess no efficiency, is a case which has never yet received a satisfactory solution.

The mind *wills to move* a limb, and the volition is instantly obeyed. The nerve follows the direction of the will, the muscle of the nerve, and the limb of the muscle. The mind, the directing power, is totally ignorant of the whole process. It is a blind musician, performing upon an instrument of a thousand strings, and, though striking at random, never failing to strike

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the proper chord, and to preserve the harmony of the machine. There is no mistake. The nerve, the muscle, the limb, the joint that is required, instantaneously performs its office in a way which no philosopher can explain.

By the aid of *the brain*, that curious and inexplicable organ, immense *stores of ideas* and words are treasured up in the mind, some of which are continually, and involuntarily presenting themselves to the attention, while we remain in a state of vigilance. Others again wait till they are summoned by voluntary recollection. If the brain be relaxed by disease, or injured by a blow, the ideas are obliterated, or thrown into confusion. But a healthy state of the intellect and the memory return with the health of this noble and important organ. The fact we know, the cause is inexplicable.

Ideas and sensations, after having been impressed together a sufficient number of times, *cohere and coalesce with each other*; so that one cannot appear without the

Imperfection of Human Knowledge. 21

other; and by degrees considerable numbers are united, and blended together so as to form one complex feeling. This important power, or rather this law of the human mind, to the existence of which every day's experience bears testimony, is the foundation of memory, of recollection, of intellect, of affection and motive, of imagination and genius, of all the active powers and intellectual energies of man, of habit, of character, of moral principle, of piety, virtue, and happiness. In what manner this law of nature operates, by what energy or medium ideas, in themselves distinct, are made to unite and blend with each other, is a mystery beyond the reach of human comprehension. It is like the attraction of cohesion in the natural world. It binds and cements all things, but its nature eludes all research.

During the state of *vigilance* the mental powers are in constant exercise. The senses, the memory, the recollection, the intellect, the imagination, the affections, the moral sense, all, in their turns, are

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called forth to action. But in a few hours the machine is exhausted, its springs are relaxed, they require fresh winding up; and the state of *sleep* supervenes to refresh and to invigorate the wearied powers. The intellectual, and the active principles are for a time suspended. But how they cease to act; and how, after having been suspended, they resume their functions, is a fact which we cannot explain.

In passing from the state of vigilance to that of sound sleep, in which all the faculties are suspended, and the perception of duration is lost; and in the return from sleep to vigilance again, the mind finds itself in a state in which *imagination alone* seems to possess boundless sway, and reason, memory, and sometimes even the moral feelings themselves are suspended. Ideas are presented without any effort of the will, or any external impression. Scenes that have long been passed, and persons who have long been deceased, are revived, and a state of things the most preposterous is often set before the mind, in

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which it acquiesces without reluctance, and which it admits without objection. What that state of the system may be which gives birth to these impressions, and which introduces this peculiar state of mind, is mysterious and inexplicable.

On the state and structure of the brain depend the developement, the exercise, and the actual state of the reasoning powers. Some imperceptible difference in the constitution of this delicate organ constitutes the main distinction between a philosopher and a brute—between a Newton and an idiot. Let some minute, indiscernible alteration occur in the internal structure, or in the vascular state of this delicate substance, and the man of talent becomes a raving lunatic—the philosopher who astonished the world by the magnitude and variety of his discoveries, is transformed into a child ; and the man, the extent of whose genius, or the point and delicacy of whose wit were the delight and wonder of all who conversed with him, sinks into a dotard and a driveller. Such

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is the infirmity of human nature. Upon such a slender thread do the most splendid talents depend. Such is the narrow, the mysterious, the incomprehensible limit which separates between the wise man and the fool.

The whole man is *continually changing*. The body passes from infancy to childhood, from childhood to youth, from youth to manhood, from manhood to declining life, and from decline to decrepitude, and some, who are most competent to judge, have computed that every particle of the corporeal system is changed repeatedly in the course of three-score years and ten.

And as far as we can judge, the *sentient principle*, what we call *the mind*, is equally *mutable* with the body. All that we know of mind is a system of ideas, of recollections, of intellectual and moral feelings and habits. We can comprehend no more of the essence of mind than we do of matter. But there is no greater difference between the body of an infant, and the various forms which the body assumes in its passage to

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decrepitude, than there is between the system of ideas and feelings of the child, and those of youth, of manhood, and of declining years. If, then, the body changes in every part in its passage through a lengthened life, we have the same reason to conclude that the mind undergoes a similar and equal change, and yet the conscious SELF remains unchanged. The same in youth as in infancy, in manhood as in youth, in decrepitude as in vigorous manhood. In the entire change of body and mind, if such change actually takes place, as in the immutable identity of both. In what does this personal identity consist? What is it that constitutes the conscious self through all the vicissitudes of human existence? Of the fact we are assured; but of the mode we are utterly ignorant.

Finally, man *dieth and wasteth away*: Man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? After the lapse of years, at the destined period, fixed in the immutable counsels of heaven, the principle of life withdraws, and with it the power of perception, of me-

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mory, of intellect, of imagination, of habit, of affection, and of moral conduct. The active, the intelligent, the amiable and useful, the pious and benevolent human being, becomes a lifeless, senseless, motionless mass of clay. Of this awful change our knowledge at present is incomplete. What is death? How is it produced? How are the vital powers extinguished; and what is the state of being which immediately succeeds? Is the vital principle totally lost; or does it continue to subsist in some new and untried state of existence? And if extinct, is it possible that it should be kindled again? Is there any reason to expect a renovation of life? any faint hope that, in the revolution of ages, even though at some very distant period, there may be a restoration to percipient, active, happy existence?

Ah! when shall spring visit the mouldering urn?

Ah! when shall it dawn on the night of the grave?

These are questions to which the light of reason and philosophy, and the voice of nature can give no clear and satisfactory



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answer. And, if, upon these interesting and momentous subjects we entertain any rational and cheerful hope, we are wholly indebted for it to the gospel of Christ, which hath abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light.



SERMON II.

IMPERFECTION OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE.

PART THE SECOND.

1 COR. xiii. 9.

For we know in part.

IN illustrating this declaration of the apostle, which, though not gratifying to human vanity, asserts a fact which can be denied by none, and is most readily acknowledged by those who excel most in wisdom and in science; it has been observed in a former discourse, that human knowledge is limited both in its *extent* and in its *degree*, that the *objects* of knowledge are comparatively few, and that we are but *imperfectly acquainted* with the few things which fall under our notice.

In our enlargement upon the latter topic it was remarked, that our conceptions of the nature and attributes of God are very

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limited—that we know but little of the works of nature, and of the phenomena and laws of the external world—also, that our knowledge of the constitution of human nature is very obscure, and that man is a mystery to himself. I add,

4. That we are in a state of great ignorance with respect to *mankind in general*, and to those with whom we associate in particular.

We are very imperfectly acquainted with the *natural history* of man. The question has been warmly agitated, whether the human race are descended from one original pair, or whether there may not be different and distinct species of human beings, as of other animals which inhabit the terraqueous globe : and whether the differences so obvious to the senses in the form, the colour, the intellect, and the temper of the different nations of mankind, are to be attributed to an original difference in the constitution of nature, or to a diversity of climate, of diet, of education and habit, and of their political and moral state.

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Of the *civil history* of mankind little can be known with certainty. Of the ancient history of nations it has been observed, satirically indeed, but not altogether without foundation, that it is rather the record of what men have agreed to believe, than of real facts. The records of the Hebrew nation are probably those which have been preserved with the greatest fidelity : yet the earlier part of Jewish history, like that of other ancient nations, is so involved in allegory and fable, that it is not always easy to discriminate the truth. Of the majority of nations, even of those which are most civilized, and have been the longest so, the origin is involved in obscurity inextricable, and the date of genuine and credible history has been computed by some judicious persons as not extending farther back than to a series of two thousand years. We hear, indeed, of histories of eastern nations of much earlier date, but till such histories are produced, and laid open to public inspection, and till they are subjected to the severe test of critical inquiry, a wise man will suspend his faith in

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them, and will rather judge from facts that are known, than from those which are still unpublished.

The *origin* of many of the most important *arts* is involved in great obscurity. Among these may be reckoned the structure of language, the art of alphabetical writing, and that of decimal arithmetic. The history of these inventions, which in ingenuity and usefulness far surpass all modern discoveries, is totally unknown ; and that which requires the utmost exertion of the most powerful genius of the most enlightened age, to develop and to comprehend, appears to have been a discovery of the darkest and rudest period of the world.

Our knowledge of the *social* and *political state* of the world is very limited. What multitudes are there of barbarous tribes, who inhabit or roam over the vast interior of the eastern and western continents, which are hardly known even by name! And from political motives we are restrained from intercourse with some nations who have attained a considerable degree of civi-

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lization. Of the interior state of nations between which the most free and unreserved intercourse is allowed, little can be known by the generality of mankind; and the foreign and domestic policy of states which are most renowned for wisdom, are often the reverse of that which true wisdom would dictate, or which human prudence would conjecture.

Men know but little of each other as *individuals*: it is often difficult to form a correct judgment of those with whom they principally associate, and are most intimately conversant. The human faculties take different directions, and many, who upon some subjects will reason with the sagacity of angels, will talk upon others with the ignorance and simplicity of children. Hear an individual converse upon history, upon philosophy, upon science and the arts, you are astonished at the acuteness of his intellect, the force of his reasoning, the accuracy of his discrimination, the justice of his conclusions. But listen to the same individual discoursing upon religion, the most

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reasonable, the most important of all topics which can engage the attention, and what do you hear? Assumptions the most absurd; arguments the most futile; declamations the most irrelevant; and conclusions the most contradictory and erroneous, at which even a child would blush. And all this carried on with the most perfect seriousness and solemnity. You would say it is impossible he should be in earnest; but this is not true; he believes, often at least, what he affirms. You conclude that he is bereft of his understanding. No. Upon other subjects he is as reasonable as ever; but his religion he has taken upon trust: he has never examined it; and the dark cloud of prejudice envelopes and obscures the most powerful intellect. In fine, few are so grossly ignorant as not to excel in something; and fewer still are those mighty minds which can grasp the whole circle of science, or which are uniformly consistent with themselves.

Mankind are still more liable to error in forming an estimate of *character*. So va-

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rious and complicated are the motives to human action, that it is extremely difficult even for the most attentive and reflecting person to analyse in all cases the principles of his own conduct; and a wise man will be suspicious of himself. Much less is it possible for any one to ascertain the precise motive by which another is governed. Least of all can men judge with precision of that state of mind, that system of habits, that complex association of affections, which constitute the human character. Hence it is that the most erroneous judgments are often formed of moral worth. Hence it is that one man is often regarded as eminently virtuous, whose heart is a stranger to every valuable moral principle; while another is suspected and condemned, whose conduct is the result of motives the most honourable and pure.

Finally, men are very ignorant of the *portion of happiness or misery* which falls to each other's lot. We see one in possession of health, of vigour, of opulence, of prosperity, surrounded with every domestic

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comfort, endued with the finest intellectual talents and attainments, the admiration and delight of all who know him. We pronounce that man happy ; but could we discern all that passes in his mind, we might perhaps discover, that, in the midst of laughter the heart is sorrowful, that he is a prey to care and grief, and that some venomous canker corrodes his felicity at the root. We see another poor, despised and forsaken, helpless and infirm, destitute, as we imagine, of all that can make life worth enjoying. We pity him as the most wretched of mankind. But, could we look into the heart, we should discover it to be full of peace, of resignation, of confidence in the Almighty, of pious gratitude, of glorious hope. In true happiness he far exceeds his prosperous neighbour. The beggar at the rich man's gate, covered with sores, who is the care of angels and the favourite of heaven, is in a state far preferable to that of the rich voluptuary, who regards him with disdain, and who grudges him the crumbs which fall from his table.

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Upon the whole, though it would be the extreme of folly to maintain that any one can be happy who is totally destitute of all external comfort, yet, such is the pliancy of the human mind, that it adapts itself much sooner than could be expected to any tolerable state of external enjoyment. Few are the external ingredients which are essentially requisite to happiness; and hence arise the erroneous judgments which are so frequently passed upon the state and condition of man.

5. Men are very ignorant of the *dispensations of Divine Providence*; and the judgments of God are a great deep.

Of the divine government we see enough to satisfy the candid and inquisitive mind that the result of it is a great preponderance of good, and that the natural irresistible tendencies of things are to improvement, and to still higher degrees of virtue and happiness. This is the only satisfactory evidence which we have of the divine benevolence; for no metaphysical argument, be it ever so ingenious or refined,

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can prove to the satisfaction of a sober and reflecting mind that God is good, if it were evident, that upon the whole, evil predominates in his works. We must, therefore, in all our reasonings, assume the principle that God is perfectly good, and, at the same time, that he is all wise and powerful : so that the Supreme Being is ever pursuing the best ends, the virtue and happiness of his creatures, by the best possible means : by those which are most efficacious and best adapted to the accomplishment of his purpose. But when we consider the divine dispensations in detail, we shall immediately discover that they are far beyond the reach of human sagacity ; and that an insect might more easily judge of the parts and proportions of a vast and magnificent edifice, than that man, the offspring of the dust, should comprehend the infinite plan of Providence, the works and the dispensations of God.

That *evil, natural and moral*, is *unavoidable* in the works of God, is a problem of very difficult solution. If we see that, in

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some cases, evil is productive of good ; if affliction humbles, and softens, and purifies the heart ; if injustice gives birth to meekness, to forbearance, to fortitude, to the sublime virtues of love to enemies, of requiting and overcoming evil with good, and to the generous resolution of resisting oppression, and of protecting and defending helpless, feeble, and injured innocence, and in this way becomes the means of perfecting the character, and elevating human nature to the most exalted height of virtue and piety : it may still be asked, might not an equal sum of virtue and happiness be produced in which there should be no mixture of evil ? and, though we instantly and peremptorily answer, No, yet it must be owned that this confidence does not arise from any clear perception of the fact, but solely from a firm belief in the infinite benevolence, and power, and wisdom of God, which could never choose evil for its own sake, nor execute its purposes by means of evil, when good was equally in his view and in his power.

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If God be just, he will not make existence a *curse* to any of his creatures. And yet, even among the brute creation, which are incapable of moral turpitude, we sometimes see cases of suffering, to all appearance preponderating over the enjoyments of their transitory existence.

That human beings, reasonable creatures, moral agents, who are placed in a state of mutual dependence, who are susceptible of kind and generous feelings, whose mutual good offices contribute in so great a degree to each other's happiness, whose chief felicity arises from doing good and making others happy, that beings so constituted, instead of following the high and generous impulses of their moral nature, should so frequently *hate and injure* each other, and should even place their glory in mutual destruction, is a phenomenon in the moral government of God which often occasions perplexity to the pious and thoughtful mind.

The *prosperity* of *vice*—the *afflictions* of *virtue*—the wide diffusion of *error*, super-

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stition, enthusiasm, and fanaticism—the limited prevalence of *truth*, the almost insurmountable obstruction to its progress, and the cruel *persecutions* of its advocates—the universal dominion of *death*—the mortality of *infants*—the removal of the *wise*, the benevolent, and the useful, in the meridian of life, and the long protracted years of the infirm and *useless*, and still more of the *wicked* and injurious—the prevalence of *tyranny* and oppression—the wanton and outrageous *clamours*, and the frantic opposition which is often made to the efforts of those *exalted patriots*, of those generous benefactors of the human race, whose ardent ambition it is to enlighten the understanding and improve the condition of mankind: these, and many others are cases of inexplicable difficulty, under the divine government, which the wit and wisdom of man in vain attempts to unravel and explore. O God! “verily thou art a God, who hidest thyself from us.”

6. We are ignorant of many things which are connected with *divine revelation*.

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The general design of the Christian revelation is sufficiently obvious ; and the evidence upon which it rests, whether historical, prophetic, or internal, is in general sufficient to afford satisfaction to the serious and inquisitive mind. To affirm the contrary would be to charge God with foolishness, in not having selected means adequate to the accomplishment of his designs. There are, however, some things relating to the Christian religion which are hard to be understood, and concerning which it may truly be said, that we only know in part.

The evidences of the divine original of the Christian religion themselves are not so *distinct* and *full*, so *clear* and *commanding* as many would antecedently have expected. We have, indeed, no right to prescribe to Infinite Wisdom ; but if it be allowed, as indeed it must, that it would have been inconsistent with the proper discipline of rational and moral agents, and contrary to the analogy of the divine government, that any, the most important moral and religious truth, should be accompanied with such



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bright and dazzling evidence as would command attention, and extort assent from the inattentive and supine; yet perhaps it might have been natural to expect, that the kind and degree of evidence would be such as to exclude all painful doubt and anxiety from the mind of the humble and sincere, of those whose only object, whose ardent wish is the discovery of truth. And though it cannot be denied that the evidence, to every reasonable and upright mind, if well understood, is in fact so cogent as to produce a clear conviction that it must be the truest wisdom to assume the truth of Christianity as a practical principle, and to act upon the presumption that its doctrines are true, that its promises will be accomplished, and its threatenings fulfilled; yet, notwithstanding this concession, who that has thought deeply and seriously upon the subject, can truly say that his mind has been at all times free from painful doubts and suspicions? and who that combines a small portion of candour with a little knowledge of the world, can hesitate to admit

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that there have been some virtuous and inquisitive minds who, after much serious investigation, could not satisfy themselves that the Christian religion derives its origin immediately from heaven. These cases are, I believe, not numerous, but as far as they go they prove the limitation of human knowledge, and the power of prejudice to bandage the intellectual vision, even of the wise. And in such cases it is surely more consistent with the spirit of the gospel to lament the imperfection of the human understanding, and the force of unseen prejudice, than superciliously to condemn the virtuous unbeliever.

That the Christian religion teaches the important doctrine of a resurrection both of the just and of the unjust, that they who are truly virtuous here will rise to everlasting honour and felicity hereafter, and that the wicked will be consigned over to condign punishment, are facts too plainly revealed to be called in question by any who admit that Christianity is true. But when we consider the *nature of death*, the entire

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suspension of the rational and active powers of man, the wide dispersion of the component particles of the animal system, their affinity to, and intimate combination with other material substances, and even with other human forms, in continued and indefinite succession ; the immense interval of duration which is to elapse before the renovation of all things, the extreme apparent improbability that a dead man should be restored to life, and its contrariety to all existing analogies, and to all antecedent experience ; and if to these difficulties we add the case of infants, and also of a natural debility of intellect ; these are difficulties which completely baffle the powers of the human mind, and of these problems it is in vain to attempt even a plausible solution. Upon these subjects, interesting as they may be, we must be content to remain in perfect ignorance for the present, and to wait in humble, patient expectation for the dawn of that glorious morning which will diffuse a bright lustre over the dark cloud of Providence, and by realizing the

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stupendous fact, will at once put an end to all difficulties concerning the mode. And in the mean time we may safely, and it becomes us cheerfully to rely upon the sure word of promise, not doubting that He who first gave life and sense, and intellectual and moral powers, and who afterwards resumed the breath that he bestowed, can, when he pleases, restore it again in a far better and more perfect state of existence. Why then should it appear incredible to us that God should raise the dead?

Further, It appears, in fact, to be perfectly consistent with the general plan of divine providence, and with the impartial goodness of God, to impart moral advantages to some which are denied to others. The *want of universality*, therefore, cannot in reason be urged as an objection of peculiar force against the divine authority of the Christian religion. It is but a particular case under the general problem. And yet, that a doctrine so essential to the welfare of all should have been limited to so small a proportion of mankind, and that the pro-

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gress of the Christian religion in enlightening the mind, in improving the character, and in bettering the condition of the human race in general, and of individual professors of that divine doctrine in particular, should have been so very slow, is a difficulty which has perplexed many serious and well disposed minds, and which it is by no means easy to explain.

It is not essential to *authentic prophecy* that the terms in which it is expressed should be fully understood antecedently to its accomplishment. But when the events foretold have actually taken place, it is natural to expect that the correspondence of the circumstances with the prediction, should be sufficiently obvious to satisfy a candid and reasonable inquirer who possesses competent means of information. That this satisfaction is not universally obtained by persons of this character, in respect to all the prophecies, or reputed prophecies, that are to be found in the Jewish scriptures, is sufficiently obvious to those who are acquainted with the bulky and discordant commenta-

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ries of learned men, equally pious, and equally desirous of discovering the truth.

That the *Christian doctrine* should have been permitted to be *corrupted*, and almost totally disfigured by antichristian errors, is no more repugnant to the character of the divine government, than the gross corruptions of natural religion by heathen idolatry; and this, like the want of universality, is no more than a particular case of a general problem, and cannot reasonably be alleged as an objection against the truth of divine revelation. Also these very corruptions, so improbable in themselves, having been distinctly foretold by the spirit of prophecy, their present existence corroborates the evidence of the Christian religion. But that a doctrine so pure and simple, so rational and practical, so kind and beneficent, should have been so soon contaminated by the gross mixture of heathen fables and rabbinical absurdities, and that the conduct of its professors should in so short a time, and such a multitude of cases, have been in direct opposition to that purity, and sanctity,

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and gentleness of spirit which is the animating soul of genuine Christianity, is a mystery, the solution of which is far beyond the reach of the limited faculties of man.

7. Our knowledge of a *future state of existence* is imperfect and obscure.

That there is a life to come in which men will be rewarded according to their works, is the main doctrine of the Christian revelation. But here that revelation stops. A thousand questions may be asked concerning the nature, the mode of existence, the employment, the social intercourse, the mode of acquiring and communicating knowledge, the sphere of action, the capacity for, and the means of intellectual and moral improvement, concerning the exercises of benevolence and devotion, and the sources of enjoyment and felicity in the new state of existence; but not one of these questions is answered. All that we know is, that we shall be raised by Christ, that we shall be like him, and that we shall be with him where he is: also, that the wicked shall rise to the resurrection of condemna-

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tion. All beyond is veiled in impenetrable darkness. Nor can any effort of reason or imagination avail to penetrate the imperious gloom, till the grand day of consummation arrive, when the curtain shall be drawn aside, and the invisible and eternal world, in all its glory and in all its terror, shall at once burst upon the astonished gaze, and all the myriads of mankind shall learn their respective award of judgment or of mercy, of weal or wo.

In the mean time, it is enough for the anxious expectant of these awful scenes, to realize to himself these grand and alarming views, to rely upon the divine promise that all will come to pass at the appointed season, to recollect that to every individual that solemn period is near at hand, and that instead of amusing, confounding, or alarming himself by fruitless speculations, it will be his true wisdom to give all diligence to be found of his judge in peace.

The subject we have been considering is of great importance, and leads to many useful *reflections*.

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1. Men have no right to be discontented at the limitation of human knowledge.

To be discontented that knowledge is limited, is to be discontented with our rank in the scale of existence, it is to be discontented that we are not angels, that we are not gods : than which nothing can be more absurd, or even impious. As creatures, our knowledge must necessarily be limited : and it is the indisputable right of the Creator to limit the powers and faculties of his creatures agreeably to his sovereign will. Not to say, that it ill becomes those to complain of the limitation of knowledge, who take so little pains to acquire the knowledge which is within their reach.

2. However limited human knowledge may be in its utmost and most successful exertions, great *thankfulness* is due for the powers of acquiring knowledge which men actually possess, and for the range which is allowed for their exercise and improvement.

The intellectual powers of man, however limited, are the glory of human nature : they distinguish the human from the brute

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creation : and they advance man to a resemblance to his Maker : they impress the image of God upon the mind : they are susceptible of perpetual improvement : they render man a moral and accountable agent, capable of knowing, loving, and serving God, and of immortal life and happiness. They are an inestimable treasure, the possession of which demands our highest gratitude, and the proper improvement of which is an indispensable duty, and a source of exquisite and unbounded felicity, and for the neglect and misemployment of which men are greatly accountable.

3. From the narrow limits within which human knowledge is circumscribed let us learn *humility*.

“Pride was never made for man,” and very ill becomes a being whose knowledge and whose powers are contracted within so limited a sphere. “Knowledge,” saith the apostle, “puffeth up.” He means the fancied knowledge of the prating sciolists of that conceited and ignorant age. But true knowledge is always humble : for they who

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know the most are most sensible of the imperfection of human knowledge, and of the weakness of the human faculties. And indeed the first step towards improvement in knowledge, is to know our own ignorance. They whose knowledge is most comprehensive, will most distinctly discern how much still remains unknown, how much the circle of darkness exceeds the circle of light: they will be least inclined to value themselves upon their superiority over others, will most earnestly pant after further improvement, and will be most willing to learn of those, who in many respects may be greatly their inferiors.

4. *Candour* well becomes those whose knowledge is confined within such narrow limits.

Man is a mystery to himself, both in his intellectual and moral nature. Few can distinctly analyse the principles of their own actions. How much more difficult is it to judge correctly of the motives of another? How unbecoming, how blamable is it, then, to indulge a disposition to im-

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pute actions to evil motives, and to put the worst construction upon doubtful conduct ! They who are ignorant should at least be charitable, and put the best construction which the case will bear ; should abstain from harsh censure, and should judge of the conduct of others, as they desire that others should judge of them.

And let involuntary error be treated with indulgence. Where all are liable to err, what can be more reasonable than mutual forbearance ? a disposition not to expose, not to ridicule, not to condemn severely the errors of others, even though they be palpable and dangerous, but with all mildness to rectify the mistakes of our christian brethren, and thankfully to receive information and correction from them ? In this way each may contribute his share to the general stock of knowledge, and all may improve in wisdom and in goodness.

5. Those subjects ought to engage our attention most, which are *most suitable to our respective stations*, and best adapted to the great end of our existence.



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Many persons of indolent dispositions and slothful habits pretend that Truth is so much enveloped in darkness, that it is in vain to search after it, and take to themselves great credit, as men of wisdom and moderation, because they have no fixed principles, and are sceptical about every thing: which means nothing more than that they are too indolent, or too indifferent to make inquiry; in consequence of which they often remain in error when truth is within their reach; and are prone to condemn more diligent inquirers as disturbers of the public peace. Let not such flatter themselves that their conduct is approved. The servant is justly condemned who neglects his single talent.

Further, Many who are of speculative and inquisitive habits, lose much time in speculations which are unprofitable and imaginary. It is the part of wisdom to select those topics for inquiry which are not only within the sphere of the human intellect, but which are of the most immediate importance. Some have little time for spe-

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culatation, and ought therefore to devote their attention to practical truths. Let the husbandman learn the management of his farm ; let the mechanic practise the art of his occupation ; let the professors of every lawful pursuit and science study to excel in their respective departments ; and let those who are placed in situations which afford leisure for speculation, employ their powers on subjects that are useful, not on those which are without the grasp of the human mind ; not upon substances, and essences, the nature of matter and spirit, the mode of the divine existence, and the ranks and orders of an imaginary celestial hierarchy, for these things are beyond the line of the human intellect, and men may speculate upon them for ever without attaining one particle of knowledge.

On the contrary, there are many subjects which will well reward the closest attention and the most diligent inquiry. Such are searching into the powers of nature in order to improve the arts of life ; tracing the wisdom and the goodness of the Creator in the

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arrangement, the revolutions, and the laws of the celestial bodies; investigating the principles of the social compact, and the laws of civil society, which are the basis of public and of private security, the links of social order, and the foundation of all intellectual and political improvement. Each should apply to those subjects which are best suited to his own powers, and to his inclination, taste, and condition in life; and which may contribute most to his comfort, credit, and usefulness. And above all, let every one attend to those great moral principles and sublime truths which are equally accessible to the rich and the poor, to the learned and the unlearned, and by which the human character is formed to piety, virtue, and happiness.

6. Let those who possess knowledge, and especially that which is of the greatest practical value, be willing to *impart* to those who are destitute, and especially to those who are willing to learn.

To communicate knowledge is to communicate happiness, or, to say the least, the

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best means of attaining it. Moral and religious knowledge is the most useful of all ; and they who have been placed, by divine Providence, in circumstances favourable to the acquisition of it should be willing to communicate Truth to others, in a way the most accessible to their understandings, and the least revolting to their prejudices. They must not, indeed, expect, let their prudence and gentleness be what it may, that they shall in all cases meet with returns of gratitude and kindness from those whom they thus endeavour to instruct. Age is angry when its prejudices are disturbed, and youth, though candid and inquisitive, is often too giddy, and too impatient to listen to instruction. It asks what is Truth? but, like Pilate, it does not wait for the answer, and grudges that patient inquiry which is often necessary to the discovery. Some will stop their ears against the messengers of Truth ; others will persecute and defame ; and in every possible way will injure and distress them. But there are some, a chosen few, who will lis-

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ten with attention and delight. To these the sacred words are a savour of life unto life ; to the others of death unto death. But the messengers of Truth must not be fearful, nor discouraged, nor relax. Their labours are not in vain. Success they cannot command. Faithfulness, and zeal, and perseverance are in their power ; and these shall be accepted, whatever be the event. The doctrine of Truth is a sweet perfume in those who perish as well as in those who believe.

7. The insatiable thirst after knowledge, the capacity for intellectual improvement, the low attainments of the present state, and the anticipation and desire of endless progression in knowledge and virtue, are hints suggested by the light of nature, and the structure of the human mind, that *man is intended for a better and happier state of existence hereafter.*

“ Else, whence this pleasing hope, this fond desire,
This longing after immortality ? ”

Why is this unquenchable thirst after knowledge implanted or generated in the

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human breast, if it is never to be gratified? Why is knowledge limited to so few objects, when it is capable of extending itself to such an immense variety? Why is the acquisition of intellectual treasure interrupted by death, often at a time when success appears to be at hand, and the diligent labourer is just about to reap an abundant harvest? If this be the sad result of all, well may the pensive inquirer be tempted to ask, Lord, wherefore hast thou made all men in vain?

It must, indeed, be confessed, however mortifying the acknowledgment, that these questions admit of a plausible reply, and that the perpetual improveableness of the human mind is an assumption more flattering to human vanity, than consonant to the known laws, and the observed phenomena of the human mind: and therefore,

8. Let us bless God for the revelation of the gospel, by which life and immortality are brought to light: and let us anticipate with triumphant expectation that glorious and happy state of existence in which know-



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ledge shall be complete, and virtue and happiness shall be immutable and everlasting. Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face: now we know in part, but then we shall know, even as we are known.



SERMON III.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD EXTENDING TO ALL
NATURAL EVENTS.

ISAIAH, xlv. 7.

*I form the light, and create darkness : I make peace
and create evil : I, the Lord, do all these things.*

THE providence of God expresses the concern which the Supreme Being takes in the events which come to pass through the created universe. This is a very interesting subject ; and in discoursing upon it, I propose—First, to prove that all events are appointed by God, and are justly to be ascribed to him as their primary cause. I shall then inquire to what extent the agency of God is concerned in the production of all events.

That all events are under the direction of divine Providence, and are justly to be ascribed to God as their proper and pri-

mary cause, is a truth supported by the clearest evidence.

For God is the proper cause of all the powers which exist in nature, whether animate or inanimate, mechanical or voluntary.

He assigned these several powers their respective spheres of action, and modelled their various combinations, certainly foreseeing the results which would eventually take place through the successions of an eternal duration.

He therefore willed, appointed, or, as some chuse to express it, he decreed, that those events should, in all cases, come to pass, which he himself foresaw would be the natural and certain consequences of his own operations. To affirm the contrary would be absurd.

Therefore, it is manifest that God is the PROPER and PRIMARY CAUSE of all events; of the least as well as of the greatest; of what we call EVIL, as well as of that which we denominate GOOD, agreeably to the language of the text : I form the light and create

darkness : I make peace and create evil :
I, the Lord, do all these things.

I do not know any demonstration more clear and satisfactory than this. I cannot discover a single objection which can, with any plausibility, be urged against it. But as it involves conclusions of the highest importance, the argument deserves and requires a more distinct and detailed illustration.

1. All events depending upon *mechanical powers*, and what are usually styled the *laws of nature*, are to be traced up to God as their proper and primary cause!

All that we know of *matter* is a combination of powers, acting according to certain stated rules and laws, by the mutual concurrence, opposition, or modifying influences of which, all those effects are produced to which we give the name of mechanical.

Of these powers, whatever be their number, their diversity, or force, God is the proper and sole author. He disposed every particle in its original place ; foreseeing in

every instance the certain and necessary results of the powers which he communicated, and therefore unquestionably willing and ordaining those results ; which, therefore, are as justly to be ascribed to God, as if, without having communicated any powers to inanimate substances, and without adhering to any fixed rules of operation, he should himself interpose directly and immediately, to bring the event to pass.

The stupendous machinery of the universe is the work of God.

“ He rounded in his palm those spacious orbs,
And bowled them flaming through the dark profound.”

He fixed the number of worlds and systems, and clusters of systems, with which the immensity of space is occupied, and, as it were, thronged. He measured out the vast expanse : He divided it into convenient districts : He ranged the etherial systems : He filled the celestial orbs with light, and gave them their positions in the centres of their respective systems : He moulded the planets : He marked their dimensions : He adjusted their situations : He impressed

their motions : He appointed the revolutions of their diurnal and annual course : He commanded the satellites to attend their respective primaries ; and in the absence of the sun to cheer them with reflected light : He bridles the eccentricities of the comets, and arranges the laws of the various systems so as to produce effects the most beneficial to the inhabitants, by the mutual actions and influences of their component bodies, without any harsh interference or disastrous discord.

Of the world *in which we dwell* he has adapted the form, the motions, the component parts, and the various productions, to the nature and exigencies of its numerous inhabitants : He communicated those active powers by which the earth revolves about the sun in its annual orbit, and impressed that obliquity upon its axis, which produces the grateful and useful vicissitudes of the seasons : He regulated its distance from the fountain of light and heat, in that proportion which insures the most agreeable and useful temperature, over the greatest extent of

surface, and gave it that fixed and regular motion upon its axis which produces the needful revolutions of night and day, and which constitutes the most obvious, and the most correct measure of passing time : He raises the vapours from the sea : He suspends them in the higher regions of the atmosphere : He directs the courses of the clouds, and at the proper season he precipitates them upon the earth in seasonable showers, to refresh and fertilize the ground : He has ordained the moon to divide the seasons, to diffuse a mild and tranquil light over the face of nature in the absence of the day, and by her attractive influence to govern the flux and reflux of the ocean, to prevent the stagnation of that immense body of waters, and to keep it from infecting the atmosphere with noisome and pestilential vapours.

The providence of God governs the courses of the *winds*—of those which by the uniformity of their direction indicate the existence of fixed laws to which they are subject, and likewise of those variable gales

which, though to a superficial observer they appear to be the effect of chance, are really subject, in every instance, to the operation of general laws, and obey the direction of an over-ruling Providence, equally with those which blow invariably, or by regular alternations, from the same, or from opposite points of the compass.

He supplies the *fountains* with water: He collects the falling drops in the caverns of the mountains: He causes them to gush in torrents from the crevices of the rocks, or to distil gently from the porous sides of the hills: He guides the course of the waters through the fertile valleys, and conducts the continually augmented and majestic stream back to the ocean from which it originally came.

The power of God also exerts itself in the *dark caverns* of the earth, remote from the eye of man. There, by the mysterious operation of unknown laws, he forms that variety of mineral substances, which when extracted from their deep recesses by the persevering industry of man, and subjected to

the needful processes of human art, are converted to the various uses of life, whether to supply materials for building, or fuel to soften the rigour of the winter's frost, or to provide useful materials and instruments for the purposes of labour and art, or to supply the precious medium of commercial intercourse, or, finally, to furnish rich and costly ornaments to opulence and grandeur.

The *least*, as well as the greatest effects in the natural world, are produced by the wise and good providence of God. Nothing is neglected or overlooked. He numbers the grains of sand : He counts the drops of the ocean : He knows every blade of grass in the field : His power and wisdom placed every particle of matter in its original station, and not an atom moves from its place without his leave. Effects the most insignificant in themselves derive importance from their connexion with the system, and the propriety and necessity of adhering to general laws.

There is no such thing as *chance* under the divine government. Every particle of

matter, in all its various combinations, and in every stage of its progress through the immensity of duration, was from the first completely known to him who seeth the end from the beginning, who comprehends universal nature at a glance, and the infinitude of whose knowledge cannot withdraw its notice from the minutest atom which floats in the sunbeam.

The *vicissitudes* of night and day, the revolutions of the seasons, the refreshing breeze, the genial influence of the sun, the fructifying showers, and the production of those substances which are subservient to the accommodation of life, we readily admit to be the operation of God. We have no hesitation in ascribing them to him whom we have been always, and justly, instructed to regard as the benevolent Parent of the human race. But when we are taught that evil, as well as good, proceeds from God, we naturally pause ; and it is not without some repugnance to our feelings that we admit the earthquake, the volcano, the withering blight, the pestilential vapour, the de-

vouring conflagration, the wide-wasting hurricane, to be under the immediate direction of Providence, and the ministers of his will.

Yet no truth is more certain, and none more consolatory than this. Darkness, as well as light, is formed by God: He maketh peace, and createth evil. This is the doctrine of revealed religion, and it is the doctrine of right reason and true philosophy.

A moment's reflection will convince us of this truth. What is pestilence, which sweeps away its thousands in a day? It is disease, occasioned by a putrid state of the atmosphere, produced by the action of an indefinite series of causes originally appointed by God, and of which this calamity, at the time, and in the degree and circumstances in which it takes place, was the foreseen and predestinated result.

What is earthquake, but a violent convulsion of the earth, produced by the sudden action of internal and unknown causes, exploding at a particular time, and often producing the most tremendous effects, the train of which was laid at the foundation of

the earth, with a certain prescience and fixed purpose that this calamity, terrible as it is, should happen at such a time, in such circumstances, and to the extent in which it actually occurred?

What are those formidable tempests, those destructive hurricanes, which in the course of a few hours ravage the works of men, desolate the face of nature, convert a paradise into a wilderness, and consign thousands to an untimely grave? What, I say, are they, but commotions of the atmosphere, governed by natural, but unknown causes, created by the divine power, limited by established laws, let loose by the sovereign will of the great Regent of the universe, and restrained by his pleasure? They obey his authority, and with the most perfect exactness they execute his decrees.

Volcanos, deluges, conflagrations, and other dreadful calamities, which are occasionally employed as ministers of justice, to alarm and punish a guilty world, are equally the result of those laws which God has fixed: and the effects of which, in every

change of circumstances, through the whole period of created existence, he from the beginning distinctly foresaw, and precisely marked out; so that all those calamitous events which we usually call evil, and which are the necessary result of natural causes, are with strict propriety to be ascribed to God, as their proper author and original cause.

The lesser evils of life, the disasters which occur in the narrow circle of domestic society, those events which distress, or destroy individual existence, equally with all great public calamities, are unquestionably to be attributed to the overruling providence of God.

The bow is drawn, or the musket discharged at a venture; but the arrow or the bullet is directed by an invisible hand to the destined object. Do I say by immediate supernatural interposition? By no means. But the event is as really under the control of divine Providence, and as directly fulfils the purpose of God, as if it had been brought to pass by su-

pernatural interposition. For the bullet and the arrow are carried through the air with infallible precision by the operation of the laws of nature, and when these laws were first established, this specific event was the foreseen, predestined, and necessary result.

A stroke of lightning, the explosion of a mine-damp, the fall of a house, or of a tree, of a tile, or of a stone, and a thousand such like accidents, often break the thread of human life, and occasionally deprive a numerous family of a virtuous and industrious head, and society of a respectable and useful member. These events are often called accidental, but without reason. They are all foreknown, fore-ordained, and in the given circumstances inevitable; the foreseen and intended effects of the most wisely constituted laws; and are all justly to be attributed to him who seeth the end from the beginning. Can there be evil in the city, and the Lord hath not done it?

The *fore-knowledge* of God is utterly inconsistent with what is commonly under-

stood by chance or accident. Whatever God foresees to be the natural result of the laws which he has himself constituted, in the circumstances in which he has appointed them to operate, not only will inevitably happen, but will also come to pass agreeably to his intention and purpose; and ought always to be regarded as essential parts of the great original plan.

What consideration can be more consolatory, or more beneficial to a serious and a thoughtful mind than this; that all events, whether upon an extensive or a limited scale, whether they be of a pleasing or of a disastrous nature, whether they influence the concerns of large communities, or are confined to the narrow circle of domestic life, are equally the work of God; all are to be traced up to him as their author and primary cause. They are brought to pass, not by blind chance, not by irresistible uncontrollable fate, but in conformity to the will, and by the express appointment of God.

This consideration greatly *enhances* the

value of the blessings of life, because it assures us that they all flow from divine benignity. So that a pious and benevolent mind not only enjoys the immediate gratification which arises from the agreeable occurrences of life, but by association it possesses an additional pleasure to which the unthinking and unbelieving mind is a stranger; namely, that of discerning and delighting in the goodness of God in all the gifts of his bounty, of rejoicing in the presence and favour of an Almighty benefactor and friend, of triumphing in the divine government, of hoping for future mercies and benefits, and of experiencing a lively sense of gratitude to the Author of all good.

Also, the habitual reference of all calamitous events to the wise over-ruling providence of God, is an unfailing source of *satisfaction and peace*.

What rational considerations are there to which an unbeliever in the divine government can resort for consolation under the sufferings and sorrows of life? The utmost

which can reasonably be expected from that philosophy, if such it may be called, which excludes God from the universe, is a gloomy and sullen resolution in sustaining calamities which are inevitable, and of which it would be useless to complain? But the rational believer, who places his confidence in the wisdom and benevolence of the Great Supreme, who refers all the vicissitudes of life to his governing will, meets adversity with very different feelings, and in a very different posture of mind. He will not yield to imaginary terrors of merely possible events, because he is assured that no event, and particularly no calamitous event, can ever come to pass without a divine appointment. When disastrous events are in near and probable prospect, his heart is at rest, trusting in God. He is persuaded that, however imminent the danger, the calamity shall not take place without the permission of divine Providence. That, however threatening or alarming it may be, it shall not exceed the commission by which it is restricted, and

that it shall in the end produce the best and happiest effects. It is no objection with him that he cannot at once discern the designs of infinite wisdom. It is enough that he knows that God is infinitely and immutably *good*, and he is sure that infinite benevolence will never wantonly sport with human misery. When calamity arrives, if a friend is the victim of its arrows he tenderly sympathizes in the sadness of the sufferer, and gently administers the consolation, and pours in the sovereign balm, which religion only can supply ; and if he is himself the sufferer he bows his head, without a murmur, to the disposal of unerring wisdom, and, with dutiful resignation, he accepts evil from the hand from which he has received so large a profusion of good. Such is the wide distinction between the man of rational and habitual piety, who firmly believes in the wise over-ruling government of God, and the man who has no faith in divine Providence : the latter can have no hope—the former can never despair.

The scriptures of the Old and New Testament exhibit many instances of the powerful tendency of habitual and exalted piety to support and cheer the mind amidst the vicissitudes and sorrows of life. Under the Mosaic dispensation pious men uniformly ascribed all events to God, whether good or evil, whether prosperous or adverse.

It was foretold to Eli that his sons would be slain, and his house degraded. The venerable priest, conscious of his own criminal negligence, and knowing the incorrigible profligacy of his wicked sons, far from arraigning the justice of the Supreme Being, submits with an unrepining spirit to the divine decree as made known to him by the infant prophet. It is the Lord, let him do as seemeth him good.

Though he slay me, saith the patient patriarch, I will trust in him. Good is the word of the Lord which thou hast spoken, was the reply of the humbled monarch to the prophet who had foretold the plunder of his wealth, the subversion

of his kingdom, and the captivity of his posterity.

Though the fig-tree should not blossom, and there should be no fruit in the vine; though the labour of the olive should fail, and the fields should yield no meat; though the flock should be cut off from the fold, and there should be no herd in the stall; yet, saith the devout prophet (Hab. iii. 17,) will I rejoice in the Lord. I will joy in the God of my salvation.

We know, saith the apostle Paul, that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them that are called according to his purpose.

In a word, the man who firmly believes that glorious doctrine, which the voice of Nature distinctly proclaims to the reflecting mind, that all events are so arranged by the pre-disposing and over-ruling providence of God, that, without his leave, not a sparrow lights upon the ground, will always see abundant reason to be content and thankful. For, under the government of God, as nothing can be fortuitous, so

nothing can be eventually, and in all its bearings, calamitous. But all events which come to pass by the operation of natural and mechanical causes, whether they be productive of apparent good or evil, in their immediate effects; whether they give birth to ease or pain, to health or sickness, to prosperity or adversity, to life or death, all are, without exception, essential points of a vast and magnificent plan, which in the whole, and in every the minutest portion and ramification, is not only wise and good, but the wisest and best; such as could not in any, the least particular, be ameliorated and improved. With this principle deeply impressed upon the mind, distinctly and constantly kept in view, and associating and blending itself with all the best feelings and affections of the heart, it would be impossible to be miserable; it would be impossible to be otherwise than resigned and thankful in every state and condition of life; and whatever Nature may feel or suffer, either from personal or social, from private or public dis-

asters, this unshaken confidence in God will, upon every occasion, produce a great preponderance of enjoyment, so that if afflictions abound, consolations will much more abound, and peace, and hope, and gratitude, will be the temper of the enlightened and well-governed mind, in a state of the deepest external distress.

It has been asked by those who have speculated upon the subject, whether the laws of nature are the *actual energy* as well as the *wise appointment* of God; and whether those effects, which we usually ascribe to the powers of matter, be not, strictly speaking, attributable to the direct agency of the Supreme Being, exerted in correspondence with certain invariable rules which he has prescribed to himself.

A *great majority* of the wisest and best philosophers have maintained that the laws of nature are the immediate energy of God. They have argued that matter is essentially inert; that it cannot act beyond its surface; and consequently, that all those effects which are usually ascribed to the va-

rious active powers of matter, are, in fact, the operation of some intelligent agent, probably of the Supreme Being himself, whose infinite knowledge can never be perplexed by the multiplicity of its objects, whose Almighty power can exert itself at the same instant, in every part of the universe, to produce the effects required; and in whose all-comprehending view events, which, singly considered, are trivial; yet, as parts of a system, are indispensably necessary, and often lead to the most important results.

I love that philosophy which teaches us to see God at all times, in all places, and in all events; and I relish not that cold and cheerless system which excludes the Supreme Being from all agency upon, and connexion with his works. But, whether the laws of nature be the actual energies of God, or whether they be powers derived from him, and acting in every circumstance agreeably to his appointment, producing at all times the very effect which he foresees and intends, is a problem of very difficult solution. Perhaps some may be

inclined to believe that matter is not to be considered and treated as that inert and sluggish substance which the former systems of philosophy have taught. These philosophers may be disposed to think that all we know concerning matter is a combination of active powers, and that when these powers are suspended nothing of matter remains. Upon this supposition it would be still more proper to say that the powers of matter are the work of God, than that they are his actual energies; and that effects produced by them are the appointment rather than the immediate operation of the Supreme Being.

With this conclusion we may rest satisfied, without entering further into those speculations which lie, perhaps, beyond the reach of the human intellect. In this let us rejoice, that the Lord reigns: that his authority is universal and unlimited: that all nature is subservient to his wise and benevolent designs: and that in this instance, as in all others, his will is done on earth, as it is in Heaven.



SERMON IV.

VOLUNTARY ACTIONS, AND THEIR CONSEQUENT
EVENTS, FOREKNOWN AND APPOINTED BY
GOD.

PROVERBS, xvi. 9.

*A man's heart deviseth his way, but the Lord directeth
his steps.*

THAT the providence of God extends to all events which are brought to pass by the laws of nature, and that he is the proper cause of natural good and evil, is denied by none who profess to believe in the existence and government of the Supreme Being.

It is not equally obvious that events, which are accomplished by the instrumentality of intelligent and voluntary agents, also originate with God, and are justly to be ascribed to him as their proper and primary cause. This, however, is a certain fact; and the evidence of it will ap-

pear satisfactory to every one who reflects seriously and calmly upon the subject.

The government of God extends to the thoughts, volitions, and actions of all intelligent and voluntary agents, and to all events which depend upon them. All are foreseen by him, and in their respective circumstances they are permitted, and even appointed by divine wisdom, and constitute necessary links in the magnificent chain of universal order, harmony, and happiness.

This observation is equally true and important, both as it respects individuals and societies. The divine plan is uniformly supported and fulfilled, and there is not a thought of the heart which deviates from its foreseen and appointed course.

First, With regard to *individuals*.

It is evident that the Maker and Lord of all has communicated to each every power and faculty which he possesses, the capacity for thought, reasoning, action, enjoyment, or suffering. He has limited to each his measure and degree of intellectual ca-

capacity, and he cannot but know the full extent of the powers which he hath himself communicated.

God also assigned to every individual his rank and station in the universe. He knows the influences to which every intelligent agent is exposed, the impression which those influences will effect, the volitions which they will generate, the efforts which will succeed, the extent to which those exertions will be rendered effectual, and the counteracting influences by which they will be opposed and modified; and this knowledge of the Supreme Being extends, with the most perfect and infallible precision, through every stage of intellectual existence, to the remotest period of duration.

It cannot be denied that the Supreme Being certainly knew how each of his intelligent creatures would have acted had they been placed in different circumstances, and exposed to different impressions; or had their capacities for knowledge and virtue been greater or less than what they actually possess. It is evident, therefore, that

it was in the option of the Supreme Being to have made whatever alterations he might have seen fit, in the nature and circumstances of his creatures, and to have introduced whatever changes he might have thought fit into the existing order of the intellectual and the moral world.

But if the Divine Being chose to impart certain powers and capacities to his creatures, with a distinct foresight of the manner in which those powers would be employed; if he placed these creatures in certain circumstances, knowing the precise effect which these circumstances would in every instance produce; if it was at the same time in the power of God to have varied at his pleasure the nature and circumstances of every voluntary agent, so as to have produced a cast of character, and a series of events entirely different from that which now exists; no conclusion can be more evident than this, that the entire succession of volitions, actions, and events, and the complexion and character of the agents themselves, are precisely such as the Su-

preme Being foresaw, intended, and not only permitted, but in a certain and proper sense appointed, as what would best accord with his own wise and benevolent plan of universal government, and best fulfil his great and benevolent design. So that no event, no action, no purpose, no not even a thought, could stray from its appointed limit, or come into existence at any time, or in any circumstances, different from what was originally foreseen and intended. This is, indeed, an amazing thought. And hence it follows, that nothing which actually exists could, all things considered, be changed for the better. For, to say the contrary, would be to cast a reflection upon the wisdom and goodness of God, who suffered these events to take place, and even brought them to pass, when a better order of things was equally in his view and in his power.

It is plain that this argument is founded upon the assumption that God *foreknows all events*, those that depend upon the volitions and actions of intelligent and voluntary

agents, as well as those which are the result of mechanical laws, and of powers uncombined with intelligence. If, indeed, we rob the Supreme Being of his prescience, if we deny the existence of this glorious and awful attribute; upon this dismal supposition, I acknowledge that events might occur totally different from his expectation, and even contrary to his intention: the Supreme Being would then be liable to the most bitter disappointment and mortification, and all that he intended for good might turn out evil; and when he designed happiness, the result might be hopeless and remediless misery; so that it might literally be said that it repented him that he had made man upon earth. If any are pleased with this view of the divine government, which is the necessary consequence of denying the foreknowledge of God, I neither applaud their judgment, nor envy their feelings. To me there appears no reasonable ground to doubt that all the works of God are fully known to him, from the creation to the dis-

solution of the world, and this is a doctrine full of consolation.

Many of the thoughts which pass through the minds of intelligent agents, many of the volitions which they form, many of the actions which they execute, are, when considered separate from their connexion, trivial in the extreme. But these are not on that account to be regarded as excluded from the notice and the providence of God. That may be of great importance in connexion with a system, which, singly considered, would be absolutely insignificant. Events are continually taking place in the natural world, such as the falling of a stone, the bursting of a bubble, or the floating of a mote in the atmosphere, than which nothing can be conceived more insignificant, yet who will deny that these motions are regulated with mathematical precision, by laws which are undoubtedly the appointment, and possibly even the energy of God, and the unimpeded operation of which in every, the minutest instance, is essential to the harmony and

well-being of the whole. In a similar manner, millions of thoughts float in the mind of an intelligent being without any apparent use : millions of volitions are excited, and millions of actions performed, which are of no intrinsic and separate importance. It does not, however, follow, that these are random speculations, and that they have no place in the divine plan. Little as the separate value of these trains of thought may be, they have their place in the general system, which if we could fully comprehend, we should undoubtedly see that these comparative nothings were indispensable to the completion of the whole. States of mind are subject to laws, as regular as states of matter ; and it sometimes happens that trains of thought, which in themselves are most frivolous, are introductory to others upon which the most important consequences depend. Great events often originate in minute causes. And the most magnificent and important discoveries have sometimes followed from trivial incidents

and random conjectures. Surely, then, these phenomena are not to be excluded from the cognizance of Omniscience.

The most *virtuous affections* and habits, virtuous actions, and all events which depend upon them, are to be traced up to God, as their proper and primary cause. It was he that imparted to the most enlightened and most virtuous minds their capacity for knowledge and rectitude: he placed them in circumstances favourable to the acquisition of moral science, of virtuous principle, habit, and feeling, of right thoughts of God and duty, and of right affections towards him and their fellow-creatures: He furnished them with means and opportunities for the exercise and improvement of virtuous principles and affections, and for the discipline and government of their minds: He preserved them from temptations which would have proved too powerful for them, and he supplied them with proper means and opportunities of cultivating and improving those pious and be-

nevolent affections which constitute the true dignity of human nature, and the best source of human happiness.

These powers were communicated, these influences were proposed, and these opportunities were offered, with the certain and distinct foresight of the effect which would be produced in every case, through the whole series of consequences, and also with the distinct knowledge of what would have happened had the circumstances, or any of them, been different, and that through the whole succession of endless duration. The Supreme Being may, therefore, with strict propriety of language, be said to form and to ordain these individuals to virtue and goodness. All their excellent qualities are his gift, all their virtuous actions are his work, and all the beneficial results of their wise, pious, and benevolent conduct were foreseen by him, and were all included in his original decree, in the all-wise, all-merciful, and all-comprehending plan of the divine government. So true is it that God is all, and in all.

To the attentive and reflecting mind it will be equally apparent that the same train of reasoning, and the same important conclusion which applies to the virtuous, and to their moral habits, affections, and actions, applies equally to the vicious. The same all-seeing and righteous God who created virtuous beings, also created wicked men, endued them with their various capacities and powers, and placed them in their respective stations and circumstances, at the same time distinctly foreseeing every action, every habit, and every character which would be the result of these capacities and impressions, and upon that foresight determining that such characters should exist, such actions be performed, and that such events should take place; when it was at the same time in his power, if such had been his pleasure, to have controlled the course of events, and either to have exterminated these evil agents, or to have superseded or modified their evil actions. Hence it follows that wicked men, and all their wicked thoughts, and purposes, and actions.

and all the calamitous events resulting from them, fall as immediately within the view and the plan of Providence, as the righteous themselves, with all their righteous purposes and deeds. And, in fact, that no evil, natural or moral, exists in the universe without the divine permission and appointment, and under the divine control. A consideration which tends, in the highest degree, to sooth and cheer the mind, and to reconcile it to all that happens.

It is remarkable that the Scripture uses, without any limitation, the strongest and the most emphatical language upon this subject, and asserts, in the plainest and the most unequivocal terms, the agency of God in the formation of the moral character, and his absolute predestination both of good and evil.

Jer. xxxi. 33, I will put my law, saith he, in their inward parts, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And again, ch. xxxii. 39, 40. I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever :

and I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.

In the New Testament also the apostle exhorts the Philippians (ch. ii. 12), to work out their salvation with fear and trembling while God worketh in them to will and to do.

The agency of God in the evil actions and designs of wicked men, is asserted in terms equally explicit and direct. I will harden Pharaoh's heart, (saith Jehovah to his servant Moses, whom he delegated as a messenger to that haughty prince,) and multiply my signs and my wonders in the land of Egypt, and Pharaoh shall not hearken to you, that I may lay my hand upon Egypt, and bring forth my armies and my people by great judgments. And, Exod. vii. 3, he declares to Pharaoh himself, In very deed, for this cause did I raise thee up, that my name may be declared throughout all the earth.

When Shimei reviled David, during the rebellion of Absalom, and one of the officers of that prince offered to chastise his

foreknown and appointed by God. 97

insolence, No, says the humbled monarch, let him curse, because the Lord hath said to him, Curse David. Who shall then say, wherefore hast thou done so? Let him alone, and let him curse, for the Lord hath bidden him.

Senacherib, king of Assyria, when he invaded the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and the countries adjacent to them, was influenced by no motives but those which commonly govern the actions of tyrants and conquerors, and thought of nothing but gratifying his lawless ambition. But the prophet truly represents him as the servant of the Almighty, fulfilling, unintentionally, a commission which he was not at liberty to violate or to exceed. Ho! to the Assyrian the rod of mine anger, the staff in whose hand is the instrument of my indignation! against a dissembling nation will I send him, and against a people, the object of my wrath, will I give him charge; but he does not so purpose, neither doth his heart so intend.

Cyrus was also a man of ambition and of

blood; yet he likewise receives a commission from God, to make the conquest of Babylon, and to release the Jews from captivity. Isaiah, xliv. 24. Thus saith Jehovah, thy redeemer, I am he who maketh all things, who saith to Cyrus, thou art my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my pleasure. Thus saith Jehovah to his anointed, to Cyrus, whom I hold fast by the right hand, that I may subdue nations before him, and ungird the loins of kings. I will go before thee and make the mountains level, the valves of brass will I break asunder, and the bars of iron will I hew down. I have called thee by thy name, though thou knowest me not.

Nebuchadnezzar was a haughty and ambitious prince. He subdued Tyre after a siege of ten years, and afterwards made an easy conquest of Egypt. He was influenced by no motive but the love of domination, the lust of power and authority, which in all ages has been productive of mischief and misery in the world. Yet the prophet describes him as acting under the direction of Providence, and accomplishing its wise and

benevolent designs. Ezek. xxix. 17. The word of the Lord came unto me, saying, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, caused his army to serve a great service against Tyre, yet neither he nor his army had wages from Tyre, for the service which he served against it. Therefore, thus saith the Lord, Behold, I will give the land of Egypt to Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, and he shall take her multitude, and share her spoil, and seize her plunder, and she shall be wages for his army. I have given him the land of Egypt, because he wrought for me, saith Jehovah.

The language of the *New Testament* upon this subject agrees with that of the Old, and is equally conformable with philosophical truth. The death of Christ was an act in the perpetration of which there was a complication of fraud, treachery, envy, malice, cruelty, and almost every bad passion of the heart. And yet the scriptures represent it as an event which came to pass by the express appointment of God. Acts, iv. 27.

Of a truth, against thy holy servant Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and people of Israel, were gathered together to do whatever thy hand and thy counsel had before determined to be done.

The pious and virtuous mind easily reconciles itself to the acknowledgment that God is the author of all good, and even feels an exquisite gratification in referring all that is excellent in itself, and in all other intelligent and moral agents, to a Being of original and unbounded goodness and benignity. But it pauses and shrinks at the thought, that the maker of good should also be the creator of evil. And rather than admit a doctrine which alone diffuses a cheering light over the dark abyss of Providence, and which alone can reconcile the inquiring mind to the existence and partial prevalence of evil under the divine government, the restless imagination of man has had recourse to suppositions the most unreasonable and unsatisfactory. Rather than

allow that evil is appointed by God for purposes the most beneficial, that it exists only by his permission, and is in every case limited and controlled by his governing wisdom, men have terrified themselves with the absurd fiction of an independent evil principle, of a devil, whose sole object is to do mischief, and to counteract the beneficent purposes of the Creator, and who is frequently but too successful in his evil machinations, and in the execution of his pernicious designs.

It cannot, however, be denied, that the doctrine that all evil, whether natural or moral, without excepting even the evil characters and actions of intelligent and accountable creatures, comes to pass not only with a divine permission, but that it is the subject of divine appointment and decree, and even enters into, and constitutes a portion of the plan and system of the divine administration, is a subject attended with very considerable difficulty. Nevertheless, if the difficulties of this question are examined with calmness, candour, and courage,

they will not be found so formidable as they may at first appear.

First, It is said, that upon this supposition God would be the *author of sin*.

But though it must be admitted that there is a sense in which God may justly be said to be the author even of moral evil, which, indeed, the Scripture itself teaches, when it says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and that he predestinated the death of Christ, and though divine revelation thus confirms the doctrine of enlightened reason, and the true philosophy of mind, that no evil, natural or moral, can exist without the foresight, the permission, and even the appointment of God, nevertheless it by no means follows, that God is in such a sense the *author*, as to be the *approver of sin*, that he chooses it for its own sake, or that he would even suffer it to exist in the universe, any further than its existence is absolutely essential to the production of a greater sum of rectitude and happiness than could possibly have existed without it. Moral evil must always be regarded as in its nature

most odious to God, the existence of which shall be endured no longer than may be absolutely necessary for accomplishing the purposes of the divine government.

Secondly, It has been urged, that according to the doctrine which has been advanced, there is no *merit* in virtue, nor *demerit* in vice.

But this objection is founded wholly upon the incorrectness of our ideas, and the imperfection of language. By merit is frequently understood some quality in virtue which challenges reward, independently of its natural and beneficial consequences. But if this be the true definition of merit, I freely confess that I am totally at a loss to know what that quality is, by which a creature can confer an obligation upon its Creator. And I can only reply in the language of the apostle, Who has first given to him, and it shall be recompensed to him again? Let the claim be made out, and eternal Justice will pay the debt, and award to every one that which is his due.

On the other hand, if by demerit is to be

understood some quality in a vicious action, which requires punishment, independently of any beneficial consequences which may result to the sufferer himself, or to others, either as remedial or monitory, I am at a loss to know what this quality may be. But if God be really, as we are justly instructed to believe, the former of light and the creator of darkness, the maker of peace and the creator of evil, this glorious doctrine at once puts an end to all doubt and difficulty concerning the popular notions of merit and demerit.

If virtue consists, as it unquestionably does, in love to God and benevolence to man, and in the wise discipline of the affections; if merit consists in those qualities which entitle the subject of them to veneration and love; if vice consists in alienation from God, in malevolence to man, in the want of a proper degree of self-government, and in the dislocation of the moral powers; if demerit is that quality which makes a man contemptible and odious to himself, and which degrades him in the es-

timation of the wise and good, then it is certain that these qualities have a real existence, and a very powerful influence under the divine government, and are perfectly consistent with the doctrine that all evil, natural and moral, is foreknown, permitted, and controlled by the providence of God.

Thirdly, it is objected, that upon this supposition, the rewarding of virtue would be *useless*, and the punishment of vice *unjust*.

But the true reward of virtue is peace of mind, and that exquisite and refined felicity which is the natural and necessary result of a virtuous course, where there is no external physical evil to check and counteract it: for to say that virtue exempts from bodily suffering is falsehood and nonsense. Peace is the never-failing offspring of a well-governed mind, the precious fruit of love to God, and benevolence to man: the habitual resident in that breast in which all the affections dwell in perfect harmony, and where reason and piety superintend

and govern the whole. Under the divine government, therefore, it appears both fit and necessary that virtue should meet with its due and natural reward.

The principal difficulty is that which relates to the punishment of the wicked; for what justice, it is said, is there in punishing the unhappy wretch, who is first doomed to commit the offence for which he is afterwards doomed to suffer. The apostle Paul saw, and states in the clearest language, the same objection to the doctrine of predestination, as it is commonly called, which he had himself been teaching, as applicable to the case of Jews and Gentiles, and which he illustrates by the example of Pharaoh. (Rom. ix. 17.) The Scripture saith, concerning Pharaoh, for this cause have I raised thee up, that I might show forth my power in thee. Therefore hath he mercy upon whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth. The apostle then starts the objection, "Thou wilt then say unto me, why doth he yet find fault, for who hath

resisted his will?" And he solves the difficulty by appealing to the right which the Supreme Being possesses to dispose of his creatures as he pleases, without being accountable to any. "Nay, but, O man! who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same mass to make one vessel to honour and another to dishonour.

This reply rather silences the objector than solves the difficulty. Nor could the inquisitive and well informed mind ever be satisfied with the common remark, that men are justly punishable, because it was in their power in every case to have acted otherwise.

In truth, the popular idea of the punishment due to vice is erroneous in the extreme. Men figure to themselves a revengeful Deity, full of wrath and indignation, who punishes sin for its own sake, to gratify his own resentment, and with no regard either to the reformation of the of-

fender, or to the public good: not duly considering that these are the only ends for which punishment can be justly inflicted; and are, therefore, the only motives which can with reason be ascribed to the Supreme Judge.

It must needs be that offences come; but woe be to the man by whom they come. A certain portion of moral evil was seen to be unavoidable, we know not why, in a system upon the whole the wisest and best; and when the end for which it was permitted shall be accomplished, vice must be exterminated: the natural and proper means for this purpose is natural evil; and this, when it shall have answered its end, will exterminate itself.

This explains the sense in which the wicked are said to be punished, and vindicates the benevolence of God in their condemnation. When the wicked have answered the purpose for which their existence has been tolerated under the divine government, it becomes necessary that their wickedness should be exterminated;

and to this end it is needful to place them under a process of suffering, the severity of which will be proportioned to their offences; but in every case will be great and insupportable; far greater, in all probability, than they ever expected or conceived, and such as will cause them to cry out, that it had been better for them if they had never been born. This we call the just punishment of their offences. But the design of this suffering is not to gratify the resentment of the judge, but gradually to purify the unhappy sufferer from the pollution of vice, and to prepare and qualify him for that state of perfect virtue and happiness which we have reason to believe will be the final portion of all the rational creatures of God. This glorious doctrine, if not expressly taught, is at least greatly favoured by the Christian Scriptures; and so far as we can judge, it is the only supposition which can reconcile the dispensations of the divine government to the paternal character of God.

Hence we justly and triumphantly con-



110 *Actions and Events foreknown, &c.*

clude, that as God is the immediate author of all good, so, on the other hand, it is equally manifest that no evil, whether natural or moral, exists without his foreknowledge, and under his appointment and control.



SERMON V.

MORAL AGENCY CONSISTENT WITH DIVINE FOREKNOWLEDGE.

ROM. ix. 19, 20.

*Thou wilt say then unto me, Why doth he yet find fault ?
for who hath resisted his will ? Nay, but, O man, who
art thou that repliest against God ?*

FEW who have admitted the divine authority of the Jewish and Christian revelation have ever expressed a doubt of the universal extent, and the distinct precision, of the divine foreknowledge; that the Supreme Being possesses a clear and comprehensive view of all events, past, present, and to come; and this, whether they are the natural results of mechanical laws, or altogether dependent upon the designs and actions of voluntary and intelligent agents.

The beautiful and necessary consequence of the divine foreknowledge, combined with the equally important and demonstrable

attributes of unlimited power and goodness, is the doctrine of the all-knowing, all-governing providence of God, which extends to all creatures, and to all events, whether physical or moral; not only to those which are the necessary result of the laws of nature, but to all the actions of voluntary and intelligent agents, and to the events which are combined with them, and result from them, in all their remotest connexions and consequences, both to individuals and to society.

The connexion of the doctrine of divine providence, with that of the divine prescience, is so distinct and inseparable, that no one can, with the least appearance of consistency, admit the one and deny the other. When God began to act he distinctly foresaw, through the utmost extent of boundless space, and of endless duration, all the events which would actually take place in the universe, and the manner in which every intelligent being would act in the circumstances in which he was to be placed. If he had then seen that the conduct of an

individual, in any circumstances, would have been inconsistent with his grand design, and would have in any the slightest degree interfered with his original and perfect plan, it was in his power to have varied his scheme in such a manner as to have produced a different effect, and to have limited and controlled the designs and actions of every individual in such a manner as to bring them, without any violence or compulsion, within the plan of his providence. Hence we infer the momentous and delightful truth, that there is in the universe but ONE GOVERNING WILL, that all events are carried on in one uniform course, to an issue most honourable to the divine perfections, and that all the various contending wills of subordinate agents, whether they know, intend, and approve it, or not, are controlled and overruled in such a way as may be most subservient to the design of the benevolent Creator.

This glorious doctrine has lately engaged much of our attention, and I know

of no other truth, the firm belief of which possesses so direct and powerful a tendency to cheer, to tranquillize, and to animate the mind, to reconcile us to the perplexities and the vicissitudes of the present state, and to inspire that habitual confidence and joy, which no external vicissitudes or disappointments can disturb.

I am, however, sensible that some intelligent and candid persons are disposed to think that this sublime doctrine is inconsistent with the moral agency, and the accountable nature of man, and for this reason they admit the doctrine with reluctance, being apprehensive that it may abate the motives to virtue, and may render bad men easy in the commission of crimes. It is said, if all the thoughts, the affections, and the actions of men are fore-known to God, and are essential parts of the divine plan, where can be the *merit* of good, or the *demerit* of evil actions? where is the wisdom of reward, or the justice of punishment?

This difficulty, this great apparent diffi-

culty, which has already been glanced at in the preceding discourse, presses with so much weight upon many candid and ingenuous minds, that it merits a closer examination than has hitherto been bestowed upon it; and I shall be very happy if I can propose such a solution of it as will leave the serious and reflecting mind in full possession of that consolation which the doctrine of the divine foreknowledge, and of the over-ruling providence of God, is calculated to afford; and at the same time, to demonstrate, what, to my own apprehension, is clearer than light, that this doctrine is perfectly consistent with the moral agency and accountable nature of man, and with the wisdom and equity of reward and punishment.

If any are disposed to doubt the propriety of treating upon a subject of this nature in a popular discourse, and before a mixed congregation, I plead the example and authority of the apostle in the text. The epistle from which these words are taken was addressed to the mixed congre-

gation of Christians at Rome, who were but lately converted to the Christian faith, and many of whom were certainly not so well informed as the general body of thinking and serious Christians are in the present day ; and yet the apostle treats at length of the sublime doctrine of the foreknowledge of God, and of its natural and necessary consequences. And the objection in the text is stated in the most pointed language. After having drawn the strong and just conclusion, "Therefore he hath mercy upon whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth," he immediately, and naturally, starts the obvious objection, "Why then doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will?" And he immediately suggests an answer to the difficulty, which must, without question, impose silence upon those who believe in the Almighty power of God, and which will abundantly satisfy those who regard this awful attribute as necessarily connected with unerring wisdom, and with unchangeable and everlasting benevolence.

I am not ignorant that there are some who undervalue the authority of Paul; but I hesitate not to avow that I am not one of that sect of philosophers, who hold in low estimation the writings of this venerable missionary of Christ. Believing, as I do, in common with Locke and other estimable and learned commentators of Scripture, that Paul really was, as he describes himself, an apostle, "not of men, nor by man, but of and by Jesus Christ," (Gal. i. 9), to whom the gospel was communicated by Christ himself, and who was selected and appointed by him to promulgate his doctrine to the gentile world. I doubt not his complete qualifications for his honourable office. I bow with submission to his apostolic authority; and I receive, with unreserved assent and acquiescence whatever he teaches in the name and as the delegate of his exalted master. In following the example of this great apostle in speaking truths, however unusual or unpopular, whatever censure may be incurred from uninformed but well-intentioned persons, I

cannot believe that I shall greatly err ; and, in fact, who is there that thinks at all, who has not at times been puzzled and perplexed in his endeavours to reconcile the foreknowledge of God with the moral agency and the accountable nature of man? And who is there that would not wish to have his mind relieved from this painful embarrassment, so as to be able, without hesitation or anxiety, to repose a calm, a cheerful, and unlimited confidence in the government of God, as infinitely wise, righteous, and benevolent? To such thoughtful and serious inquirers I hope that the considerations which I now proceed to offer, may afford some reasonable satisfaction.

A *moral* agent is a being that is capable of virtue and vice: and that agent is justly said to be accountable who is liable to be treated in exact correspondence to the merit or demerit of his character; to be rewarded for his virtue, and to be punished in exact proportion to his offences.

The creatures of God are made for hap-

piness; and that system of affections, and that course of conduct which has the most direct tendency to produce individual and social happiness, is *virtue*: and, on the contrary, that system of affections, and that course of conduct which tends to the diminution of happiness, or to the production of misery, is *vice*. Virtue, therefore, is the same as *wisdom*; it is the best means of attaining the best ends to ourselves and others. And vice is *folly*; it is the pursuit of happiness by means which are subversive of it, and which lead to misery.

Virtue consists in the love of God, and our neighbour; and in the due regulation of the affections and passions.

To love God is to form just ideas of his attributes and character, to regard him as perfect in wisdom, power, and goodness, and to acknowledge and venerate him as the righteous and benevolent governor of the universe. It is to think of him with complacency, to be grateful for his mercies, to place unlimited confidence in his care and providence, to be wholly resigned

to his will, and to yield unreserved obedience to his commands. This is a state of mind which best becomes rational creatures, and which cannot but be directly and powerfully conducive to the happiness of a rational and moral agent.

Next to devotion, the most exalted sentiment is *benevolence*; and benevolence, combined with piety, forms the most exalted character, and insures the truest and best happiness of man. When an intelligent creature extends itself beyond the narrow circle of self-gratification; when his own interest is absorbed in a generous feeling for the happiness of others; when his own sorrows are forgotten in his endeavours to soothe and mitigate the sorrows of those around him; when he is ready to forego his own advantage to promote the interest of others, and to make the greatest sacrifices of present gratification to the public good; when his public affections rise above the contracted sphere of party prejudice and local distinctions; when he regards every man as a brother, and consi-

ders every one as possessing a claim to his beneficence, who is placed within the sphere of his exertions; in short, when all his affections centre in benevolence, and his chief solicitude and most earnest exertions are called forth in doing good, this man is truly virtuous and truly wise. He has attained that perfection and dignity of character to which the discipline of divine Providence, and the instructions and discoveries of the Christian religion are intended to elevate him, and he cannot but possess the truest, most heartfelt satisfaction, and the most exalted and substantial happiness.

Benevolence, which hath its foundation in true piety, will naturally give birth to temperance, sobriety, and self-government; and experience teaches, that moderation in sensible gratifications is the true way to enjoy them best, and that no man can be either respectable, useful, or happy, whose mind is the seat of ungovernable passions, and, like the stormy ocean, incapable of rest.

The natural tendency of virtue, therefore, is to happiness. And if, as the dreary system of infidelity would teach us, no better state of existence is to succeed the present, nevertheless, self-government, and active benevolence, would generally lead to the highest satisfaction which the condition of human nature in this transitory and precarious state of existence would allow, or, in popular language, virtue would in general, even in the present life, be its own reward.

But the Christian religion opens to view a far brighter and more glorious prospect. It assures the virtuous that they are to be raised again to a new and improved state of existence. And if they rise with all their virtuous habits and affections in full vigour, they must necessarily rise to happiness. And being placed, as there is every reason to hope, in a state in which these affections will be in constant exercise, the natural consequence will be, the continual augmentation and accelerated improvement of these exalted affections, and with it the

perpetually increasing happiness of the virtuous agent.

Now this, in popular language, is the final and everlasting reward which awaits the virtuous in a future life. Under the government of God it is irrevocably ordained, that he who is perfectly *virtuous*, shall ultimately be perfectly *happy*. And we may be assured, that under the government of Omnipotent Benevolence, no external circumstance shall be permitted finally to counteract the natural and necessary tendencies of virtuous affections and virtuous conduct to pure and unmingled felicity.

Further, Those virtuous affections and habits which constitute the virtuous character, are the result of that discipline to which the mind is subjected in this its probationary state. Piety, benevolence, magnanimity, fortitude, temperance, and the other virtues, are not the spontaneous growth of the uncultivated mind. I am far from allowing, what, indeed, appears to be contradicted by the clearest evidence, and what

is, indeed, a most unfounded and inexcusable libel upon the divine character, that men are born sinners, liable to God's wrath and curse, or that human nature is essentially depraved. But as the richest soil will, if it remains uncultivated, produce nothing but weeds and rubbish, so the human mind will not flourish in virtue, unless it is subjected to a suitable process of cultivation. Where *self* is the primary object, selfish passions, and a selfish spirit will be the natural and necessary result: where *passion* is indulged, it will soon become exorbitant and uncontrollable: and a generous spirit can only be acquired by a course of generous actions: mental fortitude can only be attained by habitual self-denial: and piety is the genuine result of just conceptions of the Divine Being, and habitual meditation upon his greatness and his goodness.

Now, the providence of God assigns to every individual the situation in which he is placed, and the impressions to which he is exposed, with the certain and distinct

foreknowledge of the natural result of these circumstances and impressions. All the *virtues*, therefore, of the human character, are justly to be ascribed to God as their author. He orders the circumstances of birth and education. The tender parent, the faithful guardian, the pious and prudent instructor, are his gift. It is he who guards the unwary heart from the fatal infection of evil company, and of bad example, and that fortifies the mind against dangerous temptation. He orders those circumstances, instructions, and events, which awaken and encourage a sense of piety and virtue, which check the first tendencies to dissipation and immorality, which excite the pious affections, which form the amiable, the useful, and the exemplary character. His gentle, but all-commanding influence gives efficacy to every valuable impression. All are his gift. All is his workmanship. And they who are most eminent for virtue, have always been most eminent for humility, and most ready to acknowledge, with the holy apostle, "By the grace of God I am

what I am. Not I, but the grace of God which was with me."

But where then, it may be said, is the merit of virtue? I answer, that the merit of virtue consists, not in its laying the Supreme Being under any obligation to reward it, the supposition of which is absurdity in the extreme, but in its natural and necessary tendency to produce individual and social happiness. And all the reward which virtue can claim, or desire, as far as we are able to judge, consists in the removal of those obstructions which in the present state so often counteract the natural tendencies of virtue, and in giving free and unlimited scope to its affections, powers, and exertions. In the present state of probation, a truly pious and virtuous character may be made unhappy by corporeal or mental pains, by witnessing the distresses or the misconduct of others, or by the want of sufficient means and opportunities of gratifying the benevolent and virtuous affections. But the Christian doctrine reveals a new and better state of be-

ing, in which all tears shall be wiped away, and wherein every pious and benevolent feeling, being maintained in constant and vigorous exercise, and uncontrolled by any external impediment, shall in harmonious combination constitute a rich and overflowing source of exquisite and endless gratification.

We are prone to annex literal interpretations to figurative expressions, and to indulge gross and unreasonable expectations upon the subject of a *future judgment*. We are ready to conceive that the parties will be summoned to a grand tribunal, will undergo a public trial, and that some positive reward will follow a solemn and public verdict in their favour. But these expectations, countenanced as they appear to be by the popular language of the New Testament, are not to be indulged too far. All that we can safely rely upon is, that in the ultimate arrangement of things, they who are virtuous will, by the power of Almighty God, be raised from the sleep of death, and by his rich and sovereign goodness will be

advanced to a state of unchangeable and everlasting happiness, corresponding with the virtues and excellences of their character.

The present character, and the final state of the *wicked*, are in all points analogous to those of the righteous, and equally reconcileable to the wisdom, the power, and the benevolence of the Supreme Being.

The action, the affection, the habit, the character that tends to misery, is vice, from which it necessarily follows, that the being who is wicked must also be miserable.

Impiety, ingratitude, malignity, selfishness, and intemperance, are vices; they are diseases of the mind; they are inconsistent with the happiness of the agent; they are hostile to the general good.

Vice tends naturally to its own punishment, and thereby to its own extermination. The selfish man, wrapped in the mean and narrow web of private interest; the malignant wretch, who delights to see and to aggravate the misery of others; and the in-

temperate man, who is the slave of the lowest appetites of his nature, are incapable of true and rational enjoyment, and often entail upon themselves and others disgrace and misery, even in the present life. If there were no future state of existence, vice would not escape condign punishment: it would be its own tormentor.

But the gospel, and that alone, teaches the awful and alarming truth, that the *wicked*, equally with the righteous, will be restored to life. It explicitly and solemnly declares, that there will be a resurrection both of the just and of the unjust.

But if the wicked rise, they must, in the nature of things, rise to *suffering*. It cannot be otherwise. If men descend into their graves hardened in impiety, in malignity, in impurity, in selfishness, in intemperance, when restored to life they must rise with the same habits, and in the same character, or they would no longer be the same persons. But if vicious, they must necessarily be miserable. The contrary supposition involves a contradiction in terms.

If, then, there be a future state for the wicked, that state cannot but be a state of suffering, or, in popular language, the wicked will hereafter be punished for their crimes.

But the Scriptures lead us to conclude, that the wicked in a future life will be exposed to a far greater severity of punishment than they ever experienced in their probationary state. As in the present world there are many circumstances which appear to counteract, in a considerable degree, the natural tendency of virtue to happiness, which will be removed in a future and better condition of being, so as to leave free and unrestrained scope to virtuous affection and exertion; so, on the contrary, as in the present mixed and imperfect state there are many circumstances which counteract, in a considerable degree, the tendency of vice to misery, such as vigorous health, gay society, the attainment of the objects of exorbitant ambition, and the like. But in a future state of existence, all these impediments to the prevalence of vicious affec-

tions, and their miserable consequences, will be removed, and the whole soul will be overwhelmed with a flood of ungratified affections, and bitter remorse, and shame. Thus the misery of the sufferer will be in exact proportion to his crimes. A consequence which must occur, in the natural course of things, without any immediate infliction of the Divine Being. The worm of conscience will prey incessantly upon the heart-strings, and the fire of domineering passions will rage in the vitals.

The expedience and utility of this severer process of discipline is obvious to the reflecting mind. Under the government of infinite wisdom and goodness, no punishment can be vindictive. The very supposition of it is repugnant to every just conception of the divine character. The tendency and the design of suffering is to exterminate vice; and the more acute the sufferings to which vice will be exposed, the sooner will the end be answered, the sooner will the wicked become sensible of their

folly, and the sooner will they be reclaimed to virtue and to happiness.

And here it may be observed, that the sufferings of the wicked in a future life will probably be far more *intense* and insupportable than the erring and partial judgment of man would lead us to conceive. There is in the present state so much more evil, natural and moral, than we antecedently should have thought probable, according to our erroneous conceptions of things, that it is impossible even to conjecture what quantity of evil it may be expedient to admit under the divine government, as necessary to the accomplishment of its final purpose.

In the present state the wicked are often great sufferers by their vices, so that existence itself becomes a burden to them, and that without producing any change in their character, any sincere contrition or repentance, not even when they flee to death itself as a refuge from the torment of a guilty mind. What intensity, then, of pain,

what duration of suffering will be requisite to bring the unhappy culprit to a proper sense of his guilt, and to purify him from all moral pollution. How often will he wish that he had never been born, and how earnestly will he seek for death when it will flee from him. This consideration is enough to alarm sinners to the utmost extent of their faculties, and abundantly proves that the doctrine which teaches that the future punishment of the wicked is a state of discipline for the correction of vice, and the reformation of the offender, is far from affording any encouragement to sin.

In this important sense, every one of us will give an account of himself unto God, and will receive according to the deeds done in the body, whether they be good or evil.

In the popular language of Scripture, images are borrowed from courts of justice, and from human tribunals. Whether any external solemnities will actually take place, corresponding with these figurative and striking representations, it is impossible to

ascertain, and useless to inquire. It is enough for us to know, that the wicked shall go into condign punishment, and the righteous shall enter into everlasting life.

I add, further, that as vices, like virtues, are the foreknown results of the situations in which men are originally placed, and of the impressions to which they are exposed, the unhappy wretch whose accumulated crimes render him the victim of public justice, had he been placed in different circumstances, had he enjoyed a different education, had he been supplied with virtuous instruction, example, admonition, and discipline, might and would have been as eminent for virtue as he is now notorious for crime. And the most perfect characters that ever adorned the world, would, in opposite circumstances, have become the worst of malefactors. We have high authority to assert, that if Sodom and Gomorrah had enjoyed the privileges of Chozazin and Bethsaida, they would have become penitent, virtuous, and prosperous, and would wholly have escaped their

wretched doom. All this must have been clearly and circumstantially foreknown to the all-comprehending mind of God. The consequence is evident. EVIL, as well as GOOD, proceeds from him. Or, as it is well expressed by the venerable founder* of this congregation, in his excellent Discourses upon the Divine Government (p. 142), "Not only sickness, and pain, and disease, in all its shapes, desolating storms, earthquakes, famine, pestilence, war, and the ordinary and less common calamities of life, but the horrid cruelties, injustice, and oppression, &c., with which individuals, and sometimes whole countries have had to struggle for a longer or a shorter space, all these natural and moral evils are from God, and under his sovereign control."

From this view of the case, how natural and almost inevitable is the objection in the text! Why then doth he yet find fault, for who hath resisted his will? Why hath God permitted, and even appointed moral evil to exist? Why are the wicked blamed?

* The Reverend Theophilus Lindsey.

Why are they punished? What motive can there be to repentance and reformation?

Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say unto him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? If the fact be, as I have already stated, and proved even to demonstration, it is to no purpose to express dissatisfaction or discontent. The counsel of God shall stand, and he will do all his pleasure, whether we approve of it or not.

But we are sure that God is all-wise, powerful, and good, and therefore we are sure that the system which he hath chosen to create, is in every, the minutest particular, the wisest and the best.

We are sure that God is a Being of perfect rectitude: it is impossible, therefore, that he should have chosen evil, either natural or moral, for its own sake. He has permitted it to be introduced for no other reason but to accomplish purposes of the highest import, which could not have been accomplished without it. It may perhaps be impossible for any finite mind fully to

comprehend all the purposes for which evil was permitted to be introduced, or the benefits which may accrue from it. Some of these purposes are, however, sufficiently obvious. The odious and exorbitant vices of some give birth and scope to the sublimest virtues in others. If there were no malice, no injustice, no oppression, what scope would there be for meekness and forbearance, for forgiveness of injuries, for love to enemies, for requiting evil with good, for manly fortitude, for the generous patronage and protection of the oppressed? If there were no tyrants, there could be no patriots: if there were no persecutors, there could be no martyrs. Let us then believe, and surely it is no hard requisition, let us believe that no evil exists, but what the wisdom, power, and goodness of God will over-rule to the production of a greater good than could have existed without it.

But further, why are the wicked to be blamed if their wickedness is appointed by God? I answer, that although their wickedness is, in a certain sense, appointed by

God, it is, nevertheless, wickedness still : not appointed, for its own sake, but for its subserviency to the general good ; and, wherever it exists it cannot but be the object of moral disapprobation and disgust ; and what we mean by blame is nothing more than the natural expression of this sentiment of disapprobation, which nevertheless may, and ought to be accompanied with a strong feeling of compassion towards the person of the offender. So we regard with horror the loathsome and contagious disease ; we flee from its infection, and warn others of the danger, while we, at the same time, pity, and feel it to be our duty, to the utmost of our power, to relieve the wretched sufferer.

But why are the wicked to be punished at all ; the plain answer to this question is, because wickedness must be exterminated ; and, because, under the divine government, it is the established law that moral evil is to be exterminated by natural evil ; that vice is to be eradicated by suffering ; and, that, under the government

of eternal justice and wisdom, these sufferings will in no case be of greater intensity, or of longer duration than will be needful to the accomplishment of their proposed end. To ask why wickedness should be punished, is to ask, why a disease which threatens to be fatal, should be healed; it is to inquire, why the dislocated limb should be restored to its socket.

It may further be questioned, is it not hard that some should be appointed to vice and misery, while others are appointed to virtue and happiness?—But has not the potter power over the clay, of the same mass to make one vessel to honour and another to dishonour? Can the fact be denied? And has the creature a right to arraign the dispensations of his Maker?—Yes. The wicked would indeed have a right to complain of the existence which had been forced upon them, should that existence eventually prove a curse; much more, if, after a few fleeting years of mixed and anxious existence upon earth, encompassed with infirmities, and surrounded by temp-

tations, they should eventually be consigned, (O, horrible thought! never, never to be imputed to omnipotent benevolence,) to regions of never-ending misery and despair. But as to the rest, as no being can have a claim upon its Maker, no creature can have any right to complain of injustice, if upon the whole, the balance of happiness is in its favour, even though, after having passed through various stages of good and evil, it should ultimately be blotted out of existence. But the Christian religion opens a brighter prospect, and affords reason to hope that the sufferings of the wicked will be themselves remedial, that all who died in Adam shall be made alive in Christ, and that every one in *his own order* respectively, shall, when properly prepared and qualified, be admitted to participate in his glorious triumph.

It has further been asked, whether, upon the principles which have been advanced, a vicious man can have any reason to blame and condemn himself for any wicked action which he may commit, or any vi-

cious affection which may exist in his bosom?—Unquestionably he has. It is impossible that it should be otherwise. While his bad heart is the odious seat of selfishness, of envy, and of other vile and malignant affections and passions, in whatever way these miserable feelings gained possession of his mind, while they continue there, they must be the hateful source of confusion and wretchedness, and he cannot but regard himself with loathing and abhorrence. His mind will be like the troubled sea when it cannot rest. It might, with equal propriety be asked, whether the sufferer under the pangs of an acute disease should complain of his bitter agonies, and seek for relief.

Finally, can the wicked feel any motive to repentance and reformation ; or must he sit down with folded arms, and sullen acquiescence, in his character and his doom ?

By no means. All is indeed of God, and all for good ; and all will come to pass as God foresees, intends, and appoints. But, in all cases, man's ignorance of the

divine purpose must, and will, and ought to operate as a stimulus to exertion, exactly as though the event itself were in its own nature uncertain. Who is there that neglects the proper means of preserving life because he is assured that the time, the place, and the circumstances in which he shall leave the world, are already fore-known and appointed by God? What husbandman is there that declines to plough the ground, and to sow the seed, because God foreknows whether there will be a scanty or an abundant harvest? and all must come to pass as God foresees, and has fore-ordained that it shall. Precisely so the wicked man knows not what mercy may be in store for him. But one thing he knows as certain: that if he neglects the means he will infallibly miss the end; that if he perseveres in vice it will assuredly terminate in misery; and that it will be a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Not knowing the decrees of God, it must be consummate folly for any one to act as

though he were informed of them. To every individual, as to any practical purpose, they are as if they had no existence. Without perplexing himself, therefore, by endeavouring to fathom what is beyond his line, let every one resolve to exert the same energy, and the same resolution and perseverance in the acquisition of virtuous habits, which he is conscious that he possesses, and which he would not hesitate to exert for the attainment of any other valuable object.

Resolute and persevering exertion, with the divine blessing, will insure success. Therefore work out your salvation with fear and trembling, while God worketh in you to will and to do.

I shall conclude in the words of that treatise of my venerable predecessor, which I have already cited, and which he bequeathed as his last legacy to his affectionate flock. "From what has been said, it appears that if God be charged any way with being the author of men's sins, it is not in any such sense as to acquit the per-

petrator, or so as to excuse them, even in their own estimate, from being responsible at the tribunal of that Being, whose laws, calculated for their own good, and the general good of all, they have presumed to violate."



SERMON VI.

THE PLAN OF PROVIDENCE CONDUCTED BY GENERAL LAWS, WITHOUT OCCASIONAL DEVIATIONS.

ROMANS, xi. 36.

*For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things,
to whom be glory for ever.*

No doctrine seems to have impressed the apostle's mind more forcibly and habitually than that of the universal, all-comprehending, all-governing providence of God; and this doctrine appears to have been to him, as it justly might, and indeed necessarily must be to every virtuous mind who rightly apprehends it, an inexhaustible source of satisfaction and delight. "Of him, and through him, and to him, are all things." As though he had said, all things originate in his councils; all are accomplished by his providence; all are subservient to his purposes. He, therefore, is the sole and

worthy object of all adoration, blessing, and praise.

This glorious and all-important doctrine has been the theme of our late meditations, and it has been proved by evidence, which, if we admit the foreknowledge of God, it seems impossible to resist, that the providence of God extends to all events, to the least as well as to the greatest; and, not only to those which are the result of natural and mechanical causes, but those also which depend upon the voluntary actions of intelligent and moral agents; and this, without infringing in the least degree upon any useful, intelligible, or practical liberty, and without any interference with the moral agency and accountableness of his rational creatures. All their actions and designs, and all events depending upon them, to their remotest ramifications and consequences, are included in his grand and magnificent plan, and all are in one way or another made subservient to his benevolent purposes. So that it may truly be said that there is in the universe but ONE

governing will, by which all inferior and subordinate wills are directed and controlled. There is ONE all-comprehending Being, to the execution of whose purposes all in their respective spheres contribute; who is the cause of all causes; and without whose permission and concurrence no design can be formed, and no purpose accomplished. This is the dictate of enlightened reason; this is the doctrine both of the Jewish and the Christian revelation.

Upon this sublime and mysterious subject the question has been proposed, whether it would be necessary for the Supreme Being, in order to carry his benevolent and magnificent purposes into effect, to interpose occasionally to suspend the laws of nature, either of matter or of mind, in order to bring to pass events which would not have taken place in the regular course of things, but the existence of which is necessary to the accomplishment of the divine purposes; or whether general laws might not be so arranged from the beginning, as to bring to pass every event in its proper

time and place, without any necessity for occasional interpositions, to rectify evils which would otherwise accrue from the inexorable operation of general rules.

The popular opinion is unquestionably in favour of the hypothesis of frequent interpositions; and it is commonly believed that the great Lord of Nature often suspends and controls the course of things, either for the aversion of evil, or the conferring of good; and that, by his secret influence upon the minds of intelligent and moral agents, he excites volitions and produces correspondent effects, which would otherwise have had no existence.

The language of Scripture is appealed to as giving countenance to this doctrine, which is usually called the doctrine of a *particular providence*, and of supernatural influence upon the mind. He is God, and there is none besides him; he killeth, and he maketh alive; he woundeth, and his hands make whole; he maketh poor, and he maketh rich; he giveth rain from Heaven, and fruitful seasons; and filleth the

heart with food and gladness. The way of man is not in himself; it is not in man that walketh to direct his own steps. In all thy ways acknowledge God, and he will direct thy steps. These, and many other passages to the same effect are thought to countenance, and even to teach that the providence of God not unfrequently interposes to control and counteract the laws of nature, and to bring to pass events which constitute essential parts of the divine plan, but which would not have occurred under the unrestrained and unrelenting operation of general laws.

It is further alleged, that it is hardly possible that any general laws should be so constructed as not, in some cases, to be productive of evil. Also, that it is more pleasing to conceive of the Great Parent of all, as at all times present in every part of the Universal System, watching the operation of the rules by which he is pleased in general to conduct his operations for the general good, and to mitigate, control, or counteract them, as he sees reason, in order

to prevent their bringing to pass events which would thwart, or in any way interfere with, his wise and glorious plan; rather than to conceive that he has formed a system, excellent indeed, but which, when once set in motion, he leaves to take care of itself, and concerns himself no further with it. How delightful is it to regard the Almighty Father of the Universe as at all times present with his pious and dutiful children, watching their circumstances, pitying their sorrows, observing their wants, hearing their sighs, listening to their prayers, and at all times ready to comfort their hearts, to supply their wants, to guide them by his counsels, and to comply with their reasonable requests. Experience also is appealed to as confirming this pleasing supposition, and as giving its support to the doctrine of occasional divine interpositions: to which we may add the general belief of all mankind, in all ages and countries, wherever the doctrines of the divine existence and providence are known and acknowledged.

But though it may be conceded that the power of God will most certainly carry into complete effect that plan of infinite benevolence which infinite wisdom has conceived, and that no law of nature, and no ignorance or perverseness of voluntary agents, shall be permitted to interfere with this grand design, or for a moment to impede its progress; and though it is readily admitted that all the powers of nature shall be suspended, and all the volitions of all intelligent agents shall be controlled, sooner than the purpose of God shall fail; it may still bear a question, whether it be not more honourable to the divine character and government, and for that reason more probable, that the purposes of God should be accomplished *generally*, perhaps even *universally*, by the operation of laws originally constructed with exquisite wisdom and foresight, and adapted to every possible occurrence, rather than by those frequent interpositions, which many think necessary to check and supersede the laws of nature,

but which seem to indicate a want of skill in the original contrivance.

There is nothing impossible in the supposition of an original perfect constitution of laws, for the government both of the natural and the intellectual worlds.

There can be no difficulty in allowing that the laws of the material world may have been so constituted from the beginning, and that their mutual influences upon each other may have been so admirably contrived and adjusted as to produce, at all times, in all places, and in all circumstances, the very effects which were foreseen and intended. Indeed it is impossible that it should be otherwise. For these laws are constructed with such perfect and minute precision, that the intelligent astronomer is able to compute, and to predict with mathematical accuracy, the phenomena of nature which depend upon them, for ages before they come to pass. How much more, then, shall the Sovereign Architect of the Universe himself foresee with the most consummate exact-

ness, the effect which will be produced by the laws which he has himself appointed, in all their various and complex influences and results, to the remotest period of duration.

Equally easy would it be to divine power to place rational, intelligent, and accountable creatures in circumstances, and to subject them to influences, the foreseen result of which, whether necessary or otherwise, would be a train of volitions, actions, and consequences, which, however unforeseen or unintended by the agent himself, and however contrary to his intentions and desires, would nevertheless most effectually accomplish the divine purposes. And in this view the bad passions of bad men, and their evil actions, as well as the good principles and actions of the virtuous, may be, and undoubtedly are, over-ruled by Divine Providence to the production of good. What did Joseph's brethren intend when they sold him as a slave? What did the tyrant of Egypt propose when he oppressed the Israelites? What did the false apostle mean when he betrayed his master? Neverthe-

less, these bad actions, prompted by the worst passions, were all over-ruled for the best purposes; and both the actions, and their consequences, were foreseen, intended, and *ordained* from the beginning. "Known unto God are all his works, from the foundation of the world:" and "Jesus being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, by wicked hands was crucified and slain."

Experience is favourable to the conclusion that the world is governed by general laws, with few, or no occasional suspensions of them. The laws of nature continue their operation from age to age, with invariable regularity. And our confidence in this uniformity is more and more confirmed in proportion to the advance of physical science. Events, the causes of which were formerly unknown, and which were regarded as supernatural, are now reducible to known and established laws. And if there are any, as indeed there are many phenomena, the causes of which we are at present unable to explore, he would be thought a very super-

ficial reasoner, and a very slender proficient in the philosophy of nature, who should attribute such appearances to supernatural causes. The irregularity of the winds, and the curious and seemingly capricious phenomena of magnetism, electricity, and galvanism, inexplicable as they appear, are not therefore regarded as supernatural, but as the results of laws, which though now unknown, future philosophers will probably discover.

Nor is there any reason to believe, that the laws of mind are more frequently infringed than those of matter: and little credit is now given by wise men to those who make pretensions to supernatural suggestions.

Unexpected events do indeed sometimes occur. Extraordinary deliverances and escapes, which have almost the appearance of miracle. Thoughts sometimes suddenly rise in the mind, for which it is difficult to account, which seem to have no connexion with the existing train of ideas, and which,

nevertheless, have great influence upon the conduct, and give, perhaps, a new turn to our affairs. These events, these suggestions, these deliverances, we ascribe without hesitation to God. And we do well. But have we any reason to believe that God has wrought a miracle in our favour? It would be presumption to suppose it. And our obligations are the same to Divine Providence, if the suggestion, or the deliverance, occur in the natural order of things, as if it were brought to pass by miracle. For whether it take place in the common course of nature, or by special interposition, in either case it is equally the work of God.

It has been objected, that general laws cannot be framed so as to apply to each particular case, and that occasional suspensions are sometimes necessary to mitigate their rigour. And, so far as human governments are concerned, the observation is perfectly just. But who will presume to say that it is impossible for Infinite Wisdom to devise laws which shall, in every instance,

accomplish the purpose intended? Let us take heed how we impute human infirmity to a Being absolutely perfect.

The popular language of Scripture is not to be interpreted in too literal and rigorous a sense. The general doctrine is undoubtedly true, that the interposition of God is to be acknowledged in every event. He foresees, he permits, he accomplishes whatever comes to pass. Of him, and through him, and to him are all things. But to infer from these strong expressions of holy writ, that God interposes upon every emergence to suspend and control the ordinary course of nature, or, in other words, to alter his own usual mode of operation, would be erroneous in the extreme. Such supposition would be unworthy of the divine character, and would reduce infinite wisdom to a level with human fallibility, which is often surprised by unexpected events, and constrained to adapt itself to circumstances which it did not foresee.

That it is within the compass of Omnipotence to control the established course of

nature, and that upon some extraordinary occasions God has actually interposed for this purpose, cannot be denied by any who found their faith upon the Jewish and Christian revelations, that is, upon the miracles of Moses and of Jesus. But the admission of miraculous interposition, upon grave occasions, and for the accomplishment of purposes of high importance, which could not be effected by natural means, is a case very different from that of an every-day suspension of the laws of nature.

The doctrine that the universe is governed by general laws, and not by particular interpositions, by no means excludes the providence and agency of God in all his works. For it is a fact, never to be forgotten, that the general law is as much the appointment, and even the express operation of God, as the particular exception. If water rolls down hill, rather than up, it is by the will and power of God, who appointed the law of nature, and by the same energy, and by that alone, could its direction be changed, and the law of nature reversed. It is by the

appointment of the Creator that the sun performs his daily course ; and it was by the same appointment, and by that alone, that the sun stood still in the days of Joshua, or returned fifteen degrees back upon the dial of Hezekiah, however those miracles may be explained. True philosophy teaches us to see God in every thing : in the least events, as well as in the greatest : in the most ordinary appearances of nature, as well as in the most extraordinary and astonishing interpositions of his power. His providence

“ Warms in the sun, refreshes in the breeze,
Glowe in the stars, and blossoms in the trees.”

If it be asked, What is the use of prayer, if all things come to pass by general and established laws? I would answer, first, that prayer is by no means intended to prevail upon the Divine Being by importunity to do what he would not otherwise be disposed to perform. It is, however, natural, and lawful, and expedient, for the dutiful child to make known its wants, its sorrows, and its fears, to a wise and tender parent :

and what are we, what are the wisest of mankind, but ignorant and helpless children in the presence of God? to whom, therefore, it is our wisdom and our duty to have recourse in every time of need, to express the earnest desires of our hearts, after blessings temporal and spiritual, accompanied with unreserved submission to the divine will. We are allowed to ask for daily bread, for virtue, and for peace. And the devout expression of earnest desire will prove an additional motive to virtuous exertion, and so become, eventually and indirectly, the means of attaining the blessing sought. After all, it must be acknowledged that, strictly and philosophically speaking, prayer is and can be of no effect in the way that is vulgarly expected. But we are none of us philosophers in common life, and we cannot but act according to the natural impression of physical circumstances; and if truly pious, we shall naturally have recourse, in the exigencies of life, to an omnipresent and all-merciful Parent, and shall derive support and comfort from praying to him, and con-

finding in him. Away, then, with the cold and heartless philosophy which would deprive us of the greatest comfort and support of life; which, if it does not absolutely deny the existence of God, nevertheless places him at such a distance from us, as is almost tantamount to the denial of his being.

Nevertheless, I must acknowledge that, as he who is best informed of the course of nature, is least disposed to give credit to tales of supernatural events, so it appears to me, that they who entertain the most correct views of the divine character, and who possess most of the spirit of rational and fervent piety, will be most disposed, in their addresses to the Supreme Being, to adopt the language of gratitude, of confidence, of joy, and of resignation, rather than that of importunate petition. We have been taught by the highest authority to pray, and a better prayer cannot be addressed by human ignorance and frailty to infinite wisdom and benevolence, Thy will be done on earth, as it is done in heaven.

Upon the whole, the difference between the scheme that God governs the world by general laws, without any occasional interposition to control and modify their effects, and that which admits of occasional suspensions and changes in the order of nature and the course of things, is not of considerable moment. All serious and thinking persons, all who acknowledge the divine perfections must, if they are consistent with themselves, agree in this grand general principle, that *all things are of God*, and that all events come to pass in perfect harmony with his wise and benevolent design. Omniscience can never be surprised: Omnipotence can never be defeated: and Infinite Goodness can never be exhausted. And it is plain, either that God foresaw that his wise and benevolent plan would be ultimately accomplished, by the unimpeded operation of the general laws which he originally instituted, and therefore permitted them to take their course, or foreseeing that they would produce effects interfering with his wise design, he determined upon such

occasions, and upon such alone, to interpose to regulate the grand machine, and to adjust its movements to the accomplishment of the benevolent purposes for which it was constructed. Of these methods, one appears more simple, more grand, and more worthy of Infinite Intelligence than the other ; but the end is the same in both. All things are of God, and all eventually for good : for the greatest good which infinite wisdom could devise, and which infinite power could execute.

Having thus established the great doctrine of divine providence, with respect to those events which are brought to pass by the operation of mechanical laws, and likewise its unlimited extent over the thoughts, the purposes, and the actions of intelligent and voluntary agents, and events which are dependent upon them, and having shewn that they are all comprehended in the divine plan, and that all are made subservient to the divine purpose, I shall conclude with one reflection.

What an exalted idea does the doctrine of

the divine providence excite of the SUPREME BEING!

Wise and sagacious men, by long experience and attentive observation, are able to form a tolerably correct judgment concerning the conduct of those with whom they are connected in the various circumstances and conditions of life. They form their plans correspondently with these expectations, and by the diligent study of human nature, they can occasionally direct the views, and purposes, and actions of others, so as to induce them, without being aware of the influence by which they are led, to promote the good or evil designs of their conductors. By these means they frequently succeed in their projects to an astonishing degree. But what is the keenest penetration of human sagacity, compared with that perfect comprehension which God possesses of all his creatures, with all their actions, their purposes, their motives, and every thought of the heart, and of all the events which depend upon them, and are connected with them, to the remotest

period of duration. The all-knowing, all-pervading Sovereign of universal nature, includes all in the plan of his wise and benevolent government, and with unerring precision arranges every particular of the unbounded whole, so that not an atom or a thought shall stray from its appointed place, and that no ignorance or caprice on the part of his creatures shall ever produce any unforeseen event, or give rise to any unexpected contingency: no perverseness of will, no malignity of purpose, shall interrupt the harmony of the divine government; and all the rational creatures of God, whatever their individual thoughts and designs may be, and whether they desire it or not, whether they intend it, or otherwise, shall in their respective spheres co-operate with God, and shall be made subservient to the plan of divine benevolence; and this, at times, even in direct opposition to their perverse wills and evil inclinations.

It is also reasonable to believe, that this complex and magnificent plan is *gradually unfolded* and displayed, and in its succes-

sive periods is brought to pass in conformity to the general laws which Infinite Wisdom has ordained for the government of the universe, without any necessity for occasional interpositions to suspend the laws of the human mind, or to control the freedom of voluntary agents.

How astonishing and exalted an idea does this consideration excite of the *unsearchable perfection* of God. How comprehensive must be that intellect which could form and digest a plan of such boundless magnitude! and which could, with such perfect accuracy, arrange and harmonize the innumerable parts of the infinite and stupendous whole! How wonderful that power by which it is carried into effect! and every portion of it developed in its proper time and place! How inconceivable that benevolence which prompted a scheme, the sole object and design of which is to produce virtue and happiness, unlimited and everlasting, without measure and without end; the greatest possible sum of rectitude and happiness which infinite wis-

dom could devise, and infinite power could execute ! How wonderful that knowledge which saw that evil, in a certain form, and to a certain extent, was not only admissible, but inevitable, in a system upon the whole the wisest and best ! And how exquisite that wisdom which, without approving it as intrinsically good, or choosing it for its own sake, permitted it to prevail so far as might be expedient in the general system ; so far as it might be made compatible with the great object of the divine government ; so far as it might be over-ruled to the production of good ; or so far as it might be unavoidable in a system which was upon the whole the wisest and best, without suffering it in the least degree to exceed its necessary limits ; and with the great, and glorious, and irrevocable purpose, that when the grand and magnificent plan of government is complete, and the divine dispensations shall have been conducted to their proper termination, all evil, natural and moral, shall be for ever exterminated from the works of God.

How *transcendent* must be that *happiness* which results from infinite benevolence, under the direction of infinite wisdom, fulfilling in their appointed season, by the energy of infinite power, all its glorious purposes, contemplating with inconceivable delight the good which has already been accomplished, and regarding as present the whole of that immensity of bliss which eternity will ripen and evolve, and which is even now actually existent in the views of the Infinite Being, to whom things that are not, are as though they were, and of whom alone it can with propriety be predicated, that he inhabiteth eternity. How are all the powers of reason and imagination absorbed and lost in the stupendous abyss of divine providence!

The apostle Paul, penetrated with these astonishing contemplations of the character and government of the great Ruler of the universe, unable to contain his rapturous feelings, bursts out in the language of joyful admiration, "O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and the knowledge of God!

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how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who hath been his counsellor? For of him, and through him, and to him are all things: to whom be glory for ever."

To this sublime doxology may all the rational creatures of God, under a deep impression of the excellences of the divine character, and of the wisdom, the equity, and the benignity of the divine government, add their grateful and joyful AMEN, and their everlasting Hallelujahs!



SERMON VII.

OBJECTIONS STATED AND ANSWERED.

ROM. ix. 14.

What shall we say, then? Is there unrighteousness with God? God forbid.

IF there be a doctrine which, beyond all others, is favourable to virtue, and replete with consolation, which is like oil to the troubled waves, or as balm to the burning wound—if there be a doctrine which beyond all others reconciles a man to himself, to his condition, to his fellow-creatures, and to his God—which makes him satisfied with all that happens—which administers peace in tribulation—which dispels all fear, and removes solicitude from the breast—which forcibly tends to extinguish all bad passions in the heart, and to substitute patience, forbearance, meekness, and forgiveness, in the room of hatred, malevolence,

and revenge—which inspires fortitude and resolution to persevere in virtuous and benevolent exertion amidst multiplied disappointments, increasing difficulties, and in defiance of insensibility, ingratitude, reproach, and calumny—if there be a doctrine which, beyond all others, infuses into the soul that joy and peace which no external occurrence can disturb—a doctrine which, if it were universally believed, felt, and acted upon, would convert this jarring and tempestuous world into a paradise of love, and concord, and happiness—it is the doctrine of the all-ruling, all-comprehending providence of God—it is the doctrine, that in this great universe there is but ONE GOVERNING WILL, and that all inferior and subordinate wills are made subservient to the designs of the great Supreme—it is the doctrine that all contingency is excluded from the works of God, and that nothing comes to pass in the created universe but what was foreseen, permitted, and provided for, and one may even say *ordained* in the counsels of God, as the wisest and

the best, and, all things considered, the most expedient and eligible in a system which was selected as exhibiting the most illustrious display of the divine perfections. It is the grand and the sublime doctrine, that evil, as well as good, proceeds immediately from God; not chosen by him for its own sake; not in any sense approved by him, but permitted by his wisdom, limited by his power, and over-ruled by his providence for the production of good—of good far greater than could have existed, unconnected with the antecedent evil.

This doctrine of the all-comprehending, the all-governing providence of God—this doctrine, the very thought of which is sufficient to inspire the heart with rapture, and the tongue with praise—this sublime doctrine, so clearly, so directly demonstrable from the principles of reason, so explicitly, so forcibly, so repeatedly announced, and insisted upon in the Scriptures, both of the Old Testament and the New—this grand and delightful doctrine is, strange to think, an object of general

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prejudice, distaste, and even alarm; and that, not so much to the vulgar and illiterate, to the ignorant and unthinking, as to the intelligent and well-educated, to those who, in other respects, and upon other subjects, discover strength of intellect, acuteness of discrimination, solidity of judgment, and comprehension of mind. This doctrine is, somehow or other, offensive to the virtuous and the good, to those who, from their integrity of heart, their innocence and purity of life, their piety to God, and their benevolence to man, are entitled to all the animating hopes, and to all the rich consolations which are the natural and necessary result of this glorious truth, well understood, cordially received, and habitually cherished. Not a few of this description, by a singular exception from their general character, influenced in this case alone by some extraordinary misconception, by groundless prepossession, and by false alarm, strangely close their eyes against the light, resist the most palpable evidence, and with unad-

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vised precipitation they push from their lips that precious balm which divine mercy offers to, yea, presses upon their acceptance. They obstruct their own improvement in knowledge and virtue. They are enemies to their own happiness, and they disparage and reject a doctrine, the belief of which, if not essential to their salvation, which God forbid ! is, I will be bold to say, essential to their peace. I will be bold to say, that till this glorious and sublime truth is well understood, and practically felt, they never will, or can enjoy all that consolation and delight to which their virtue is entitled ; they never will or can experience that peace of God which passeth all understanding. They never will nor can possess that entire conformity to his moral image, that dutiful and unreserved submission to his will, that holy joy and triumph in his government, which is the truest and sublimest happiness of a reasonable creature. I will, without hesitation, aver my conviction, that if this glorious truth be not distinctly apprehended and acknow-

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ledged in this region of twilight and of shadow, the perception of it will be the first acquisition in that better state where darkness will be exchanged for light, and ignorance for knowledge; and of the happiness of which the contemplation of this sublime and glorious truth in all its interesting and boundless ramifications, connexions, and consequences, will constitute a refined and copious source. For, if this doctrine of an all-ruling, all-comprehending providence be not true, the universe is without a God, the world is without a parent, and all this fair, and beautiful, and harmonious system, may terminate in confusion, misery, and despair.

Would to God, says the eloquent apostle to the half-converted Hebrew prince, would to God that not only thou, but that all who hear me this day, were not only almost, but altogether such as I am! Nor can I, my Christian hearers, under the vivid impression of the vast importance of this sublime truth, forbear to breathe the same ardent aspiration, would

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to God that all who hear me this day were equally convinced with myself of the certainty, and of the supreme importance of the all-ruling, all-comprehending providence of God, and that they enjoyed the delightful experience of the blessed and salutary effect of this glorious doctrine !

But I well know that truths, the most demonstrable and the most vital, can only make their way by slow degrees, and that prepossessions and prejudices, not seldom most powerful and inveterate when least perceived, often interpose insurmountable obstacles ; that they fascinate the imagination, mislead the judgment, and render the understanding inaccessible to the clearest evidence. Prejudice is the worst enemy with which truth has to encounter ; and though the ultimate triumph of truth is secure, this complete victory is not the work of a day ; and there is no post where prejudice takes a firmer stand, or is more generally supported, than in her resistance to the doctrine of the all-comprehending providence of God, to the doctrine which

teaches that evil as well as good is of divine appointment, and will be over-ruled for the best purposes. Upon this strong hold, where the enemy is so deeply entrenched, would I this day, as one enlisted under the banner of truth, confident in the cause, how justly soever diffident of the abilities of the advocate, form an attack, and with the powerful artillery of reason would I endeavour to open a passage for her victorious standard. In other words, and dropping the language of metaphor, I propose to state, and to the best of my ability to solve and to obviate the most plausible and popular objections against the sublime and delightful doctrine of the all-comprehending providence of God.

This glorious doctrine has been confounded with *fatalism*,—and with *arbitrary predestination*. It is said to be inconsistent with the *freedom of the human will*—and with the wisdom and justice of *reward and punishment*:—that it has a tendency to *harden* wicked men in the *commission of*

crimes—and to induce universal *indolence and inactivity*.

I. The universal all-comprehending providence of God is often confounded with blind, inexorable *fatalism*.

Fatalism supposes the existence of blind, arbitrary, unrelenting force, which, without motive, and without design, good or bad, brings every thing to pass by irresistible necessity, over which human power has no control; and to remedy or mitigate the evils of which human wisdom can discover no expedient. This doctrine, so contrary to all reason and experience, would, if true, be indeed a most uncomfortable and heart-withering system; but this is not the true, the philosophic, and the Christian doctrine of an all-governing Providence. Indeed, upon this latter system, as well as upon the former, every event takes place at the appointed time, in exact correspondence with the divine plan and purpose; not a thought is out of place, not a hair of the head is un-

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noticed; not a sparrow lights upon the ground without permission. But the plan thus formed, and in all its ramifications completely carried into effect, is the plan of infinite wisdom, prompted by infinite benevolence, always selecting, always executing what is absolutely and invariably the wisest and the best; so that there is always the best possible reason for whatever comes to pass; and if the question is asked, **Why does this event happen? Why does that evil occur? Why does not such a beautiful scheme prosper?** The answer is always ready, not, that these events happened in the necessary course of nature, and by the over-ruling power of irresistible fate, but that, in all their connexions, circumstances, and consequences, they appeared to the all-comprehending mind of God to be the best which could happen at that time, and in those circumstances; and which, all things considered, would be most conducive to the general good. The difference between these two systems is no less than infinite. The one is the

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parent of peace, and hope, and joyful expectation. The other is pregnant with misery and despair.

II. The doctrine of the all-comprehending providence of God is often confounded with the gloomy notion of *absolute predestination*, and arbitrary decrees.

It is with some a favourite notion that God acts from mere good pleasure, from absolute sovereignty, without any motive of wisdom or benevolence to influence his choice, without any reason for choosing one thing rather than its opposite; and that all he does or ordains is right, solely because he chooses it. It is their favourite doctrine, that God having, by his sovereign pleasure ordained, that all the myriads of mankind should become liable to eternal misery for Adam's sin, of which it was quite impossible that they should be personally guilty, he has, from mere good pleasure, and as an act of absolute sovereignty, without any reason for preference, elected some, a happy few, out of this immense mass, to everlasting life: and these

in due time he effectually calls, and justifies, and sanctifies, and glorifies; leaving or dooming the hapless residue, the immense majority, though equally the creatures of his power, equally helpless, and equally blameless, to all the miseries of this life, to death itself, and TO THE PAINS OF HELL FOR EVER. This, according to some, is the doctrine of Free Grace; it is one of the glorious peculiarities of the gospel; this it is that lays the creature low, that precludes all human merit, and that magnifies the absolute sovereignty, and the electing love of God. But surely, if this be a doctrine of the gospel, it must be the gospel of Satan himself; for I am sure that no such absurd, blasphemous, and horrible doctrine as this is contained in the gospel of the meek and holy Jesus, that glorious gospel of the grace of God, which proclaims peace on earth, and good-will to men. This odious doctrine of arbitrary decrees is so repugnant to every principle of reason, justice, and benevolence, and so inconsistent with every amiable, every ve-

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nerable attribute of God, and with every conception which reason and revelation teach us to form of the divine government, that to its unhappy advocates it is a continual source of anxiety and alarm ; and in many who oppose it, the very thought of this doctrine excites such bitter sensations of disgust, that, in order to avoid it, they rush into the contrary extreme, and reject, without inquiry, the glorious doctrine of the all-comprehending, all-governing providence of God. Wishing to recede as far as possible from a hideous and dangerous error, they have unwarily abandoned the glorious attribute of divine foreknowledge, or they have closed their eyes against the natural and necessary consequences of this important doctrine, and have run into contradiction, to avoid what they supposed to be blasphemy. But, surely, the proper way of repelling error is not by hurrying into the contrary extreme ; is not by denying or invalidating the divine attributes, and thereby giving an improper advantage to the adversaries of truth ; but by conceding

that which cannot be denied, viz. that every thing which happens constitutes a portion of a grand and comprehensive plan, which plan is the result of the eternal councils of infinite wisdom and benevolence, and includes, not the reprobation and eternal misery of the majority, but the ultimate virtue and everlasting felicity of the whole.

III. The doctrine of the universal and all-comprehending providence of God is thought by some to be INCONSISTENT WITH THE LIBERTY OF HUMAN ACTIONS.

But what is this liberty, of which we are so jealous? Is it the liberty of acting in contradiction to the divine foreknowledge? Even a child must see the absurdity of such a supposition as this. Such a liberty is manifestly impossible and inconceivable. If any one possessed and exercised such a liberty as this, he must be treated as a lunatic—for to act without motive, or in opposition to all motive, is the definition of lunacy; and the unhappy agent must be put under restraint, that he may not do mischief to himself and others. The only

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liberty worthy of a rational being—the only consistent and intelligible liberty, is the liberty of human actions—it is the liberty of doing or forbearing, as we please—it is the liberty of being prudent, industrious, temperate, chaste, upright, benevolent, and pious, without any foreign impediment or control, if virtue be the object of our choice—and the liberty or power of being dishonest, intemperate, licentious, avaricious, unfeeling, and cruel, if we please, and if we choose, the character and the consequences of vice. This is the only liberty which we possess or understand; and, in fact, the only liberty that is essential to moral agency, and to moral responsibility. This liberty is inherent in our nature; it is in continual exercise, and is the sole foundation of approbation and disapprobation, of praise and blame; and this liberty is perfectly consistent with, yea, it is the natural result of the all-seeing, all-governing providence of God, whose benevolent purposes for the good of his creatures could not be carried into effect if they

were not made practically free and competent, without compulsion, or any external restraint, to choose good or evil, virtue or vice.

IV. The great doctrine of the universal all-comprehending providence of God, is thought by some to be *inconsistent with the scripture doctrine of reward and punishment.*

And I should, indeed, be of the same opinion, and should concede the objection in its full force, if the modern self-called evangelical doctrine were true. If the heart of man were naturally depraved, *tainted with sin to the very core* ; if, in this state, men were not only unable to help themselves, but even to will and to pray for assistance, denied the aid they need, but cannot ask, and denied it for the very reason that they do not ask for it ; and finally plunged into eternal misery because they are, and continue to be, and cannot help being, what their Creator made them ; who placed them, of his own will, without any consent of theirs, in the circumstances in which they are, foreseeing,

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and intending, or in other words ordaining the inevitable results. If this sad doctrine be true, and if it is thus that God deals with his helpless and miserable creatures, no terms of censure would be sufficiently harsh to express our abhorrence of this flagrant injustice, this odious tyranny. But if this be not to ascribe unrighteousness to God, it is hard to say what would be so. If this be not to impeach the Regent of the universe as an omnipotent tyrant, words are without a meaning, and there never was any such thing as tyranny in the world.

Moreover, if we conceive, as we are apt to do, though in words we disavow it, that the Supreme Being is subject to human passions, that he feels anger and indignation, and that he punishes the guilty from motives of resentment and revenge, we fall into a grievous error. No truly! Fury is not in him. And whoever may misconceive and misrepresent, or whoever may disapprove and dislike the doctrine, I must, to the best of my ability, defend the divine dispensations, justify the divine character,

and *vindicate the ways of God to man*. I must assert the paternal government of God, and his equal and impartial goodness to all his creatures.

It is a truth of primary importance in morals, it is a truth which revelation alone can teach, and which Christianity has expressly revealed, so as to leave not a shadow of doubt upon the subject, that the wicked shall rise to condemnation; that indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, unutterable and insupportable, await the unrighteous and impenitent in a life to come; and this doctrine, so solemnly and explicitly taught in the scripture, is confirmed by every appearance of nature, and by every phenomenon of mind. And woe, woe unutterable, will be the portion of those who persevere in the practice of vice, under the fond, presumptuous expectation, of escaping from misery.

But it is in truth equally evident, both from the deductions of reason and from the discoveries of revelation, that the wickedness of the wicked is included in the gene-

ral plan of divine providence : that the tyrant of Egypt, and that the murderers of Jesus, did no more than what God had foreknown, and appointed in the councils of his eternal wisdom. It is also certain that these very individuals would, if they had been placed in different circumstances, have been virtuous and happy ; that Tyre and Sidon, that even Sodom and Gomorrha would have been penitent and virtuous, had they been favoured with the privileges of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. And further, it must be allowed, that all this wickedness is permitted and over-ruled, for the accomplishment of the divine purposes, and for the general good.

How then are these two doctrines to be reconciled to each other, to the wisdom and goodness of the divine character, and to the propriety and justice of the promises and threatenings of the Holy Scriptures. How can it be that vice should be foreseen, and upon that foresight admitted into the divine plan, and overruled for a greater good than could have existed without it,

and yet, that the vicious, who are thus, unintentionally indeed, but really, and necessarily subservient to, and the actual means of accomplishing the divine plan, and producing the greatest possible good, should not only be excluded from participating in the good produced, but be consigned to severe punishment and insupportable misery ?

This difficulty, this great difficulty, which has perplexed the wise and good in all ages, is not to be disposed of surely by maintaining, either that God ordains vice, and therefore, that he will not punish it ; or, that God will certainly punish vice, and therefore, that he did not intend its existence. Neither of these solutions will yield satisfaction to the serious and thoughtful mind.

It is in vain to shut our eyes against the light. The fact is, that God foresaw, and foreseeing did permit, and even ordain the existence of vice for the sake of the greater good which was to be extracted from it ; and that, nevertheless, it is his express determination to punish the wicked with due

severity. The question is, upon what ground can punishment be due?

I cannot feel happy under the divine government unless I am assured that this government is just, benevolent, and wise. If any fact occurs which appears to militate against this conclusion, I cannot be satisfied with being told it is a mystery, I am solicitous, if possible, to reconcile unfavourable appearances to governing rectitude; and in the present case I am persuaded that there is no difficulty which does not admit of an easy and satisfactory solution.

In fact, no difficulty offers itself, but that which arises from imputing to the omniscient and immutable God, the infirmities and passions of frail and fallible men. When the Scriptures say that God is angry with the wicked, and that he will punish vice, we immediately attribute to him the irritable feelings of human beings; we conceive that he is operated upon by anger, indignation, and revenge; and that he is prompted to action by a desire to gratify his resentment, not by good will to the sufferer,

and a desire to promote his benefit and reformation.

But I must again beg leave to renew, and to press the consideration, that the government of God is a paternal government, and that the wicked, equally with the virtuous, are the work of his hands, the pensioners on his bounty, and the objects of his care and providence. The punishments, therefore, which God inflicts are the chastisement of a father, not the vindictive strokes of an enemy. If a child offend, how does the wise parent act? Does he instantly fly into a passion and punish without mercy, and without measure? If wisdom and kindness dwell in his heart he pities the ignorance, the thoughtlessness, and the bad passions of the child, and administers correction in order to reclaim. If the fault is renewed, the correction is repeated, and if needful it is continued with increased severity, though often doubtless with an aching heart, till the design is accomplished and the sufferer reclaimed. Who does not see how much more rational, more dignified,

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and more effectual, correction thus administered must be, than the same discipline when it originates in resentment and malice? Seldom does punishment, flowing from such a polluted source, even though it be not excessive, produce any considerable or permanent benefit. But where it deters from crime, it fails to generate that reverence, and affectionate regard to the reprob, which is one of the most ingenuous feelings of the youthful breast, and one of the best motives, and most effectual safeguards to virtue.

In strict justice the character of God would stand completely vindicated, if the wicked, permitted to exist for a time, in order to answer the purposes of the divine government, should, after a limited period, in which misery should not upon the whole preponderate, be blotted out of existence; for who has any claim upon his maker for more than this, that his being should not be made a curse, since existence was not the object of his choice. And this is, perhaps, all that the light of nature could of

itself discover ; the only conclusion to which unassisted reason could lead, even with the correctest views of the divine character.

But revelation teaches otherwise, and opens to view a stupendous scene of judgment and of mercy which, in the councils of divine wisdom, is reserved for the unrighteous. Revelation teaches what reason could never have discovered, that the wicked will rise again. It teaches further, what reason must allow, and what is indeed the obvious and necessary consequence of the foregoing fact, that the wicked when raised must be raised to suffering, or in other words to punishment in exact proportion to their character and crime ; and this punishment is described as fearful and insupportable ; as indefinite both in extent and duration.

But revelation does more. It gives birth to the reflection, that man, how vicious soever, cannot reasonably be supposed to be roused from the insensibility of thousands of years, for no other purpose than to suffer

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an insupportable load of anguish and misery, and then to be again reduced to insensibility and nothing. Such a proceeding as this would indeed be utterly unworthy of God, and inconsistent with every correct idea of justice and benevolence. This consideration alone would form a ground of hope that the sufferings of the wicked would be a remedial process.

But revelation teaches further still. It describes the future sufferings of the wicked by the word *correction*,* a word which properly expresses suffering inflicted for the benefit of the offender. It teaches that the anger of God is but for a moment, but that his mercy endureth for ever. It announces the destruction even of the second death; and, finally, it distinctly declares, that as in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive; and be it observed, that the resurrection of which the apostle speaks is represented as a glorious privilege to all the participants of it, that is, to all mankind.

* N. B.—Κολασις. See Matt. xxv. 46.

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Not indeed to all at once. No, that would be as inconsistent with the divine wisdom as it is with the divine word. But to every one *in his own order*, when it shall appear that he is properly qualified by a previous discipline for admission to the society of just men made perfect, to the presence of God, the judge of all, and of Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant. Thus shall all things be subdued unto Christ, who shall then, when all his enemies are put under his feet, resign the kingdom to God, even the Father, and God shall be all in all. All will be perfectly and for ever virtuous, and perfectly and for ever happy.

This is the glorious termination of the divine dispensations to mankind. And thus it is, that the foreknowledge and all-ruling providence of God is fully justified in the future sufferings of the wicked and impenitent. All are brought to ultimate and infinite, and therefore to equal happiness, by different processes, and at different periods; and all the reasonable creatures of God will have reason to rejoice in their ex-

istence, and ultimately to unite in one grand universal chorus of everlasting hallelujah, salvation, blessing, and praise.

V. It is further urged, that the doctrine of the universal, all-comprehending providence of God, has a tendency to make men *easy in the commission of crimes.*

But this is impossible. For the very definition of vice is, a course of conduct which leads to ultimate misery. It is the disorganization of the intellectual and moral powers. A man can no more be happy in the practice of vice, than he can be at ease under the dislocation of a limb, or with a broken bone. And who is the man who would presume to plead, that if God has predestinated me to be a sinner, I cannot help it, and therefore I will go on till he forces me back? Who, I say, will presume to argue thus, but the man who having sold himself to iniquity is determined to persevere in crime? Such persons will always find pretences to harden themselves in wickedness, whether they believe or not in the foreknowledge of God. It is in vain

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now to object to the publication of the doctrine because it may be, and has ever been, abused by bad men, to palliate their crimes. The doctrine is no secret, nor can it be kept as such ; and if bad men make a bad use of it, to harden themselves in guilt, let good men learn to make good use of it, to encourage themselves in virtue. Surely, good men ought not to be deprived of the consolation which truth affords, because wicked men may pervert it to their own destruction. What truth is not liable to abuse ? Who will deny that to the most aggravated offences mercy will be extended where repentance is sincere ? But is not this doctrine every day perverted to encourage men to persevere in vice, who constantly sin with the intention to repent. But are we therefore to refrain from preaching the necessity and availableness of repentance ? A diseased stomach converts the most wholesome nutriment into poison. And we are taught by the apostle not to conceal important truth, but to declare the whole

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counsel of God, which, though it be to some an odour of death unto death, will, to those whose hearts are rightly disposed, be an odour of life unto life.

VI. It is alleged that the doctrine of the all-comprehending providence of God, if generally received, would reduce mankind to a state of *general torpor and inactivity*.

But in reply to this objection we may observe,

1. That whatever be the consequence, truth remains the same. And surely it may be admitted as a just principle in *moral science*, that from what is true, no consequence can follow but what is good.

2. If the end is foreseen and determined, the means are equally foreseen, and equally determined. If life is to be prolonged to fourscore years, the means by which it is to be so prolonged are necessary links in the chain of providence.

3. It is not true in fact that they who believe in the all-comprehending plan of

divine providence, and in the doctrines of necessity and predestination, are more indolent than others.

And, Lastly, The thing itself is impossible. A determination to sit still, and to do nothing, would be like a determination to stop the breath : it might succeed to a certain extent, and for a limited time, after which the stimulus would become too strong to be resisted. In like manner, whatever inclination, whatever inducement men might have to be indolent, happily for them they are generally placed in circumstances which render exertion necessary, and the influence of these circumstances is too powerful to be resisted. So that very little danger of this kind would be likely to accrue from the prevalence even of the grossest system of fatalism. Such is the wise provision of Divine Providence to prevent practical injury from the greatest speculative errors.

To conclude, I trust that the considerations which have been offered will, upon due attention, be found sufficient to obviate

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the objections, and to soften the prejudices of many well-disposed persons against a doctrine demonstrably true, the general acceptance, and practical application of which would be eminently conducive to the virtue and happiness of mankind.



SERMON VIII.

THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD OVERRULING THE
SOCIAL STATE OF MAN.

JOB, xii. 23.

*He increaseth the nations, and destroyeth them : He
enlargeth the nations, and straiteneth them again.*

THE providence of God extends to all events which are brought to pass by what are called the laws of nature, which are in fact no other than his appointment and energy. “He formeth light, and createth darkness ; he maketh peace, and createth evil.”

It is no less true, though the truth be neither so immediately apparent, nor so universally acknowledged, that events which are accomplished by the intervention of intelligent and voluntary agents, also originate with God, and are justly traced up to him, as their proper and primary cause.

All his creatures are instruments in his hands to perform his pleasure, and to fulfil, in their respective spheres, the purposes of his wisdom and his benevolence.

Hence follows the obvious and important consequence, to which I desire at this time more particularly to direct your attention, namely, that the divine providence extends to men, considered in a social state, and that God is, in a true and proper sense, the primary Author of the good and evil which happens to individuals in their social relations, and to communities in their public capacity. The proof of this is so evident that it requires but little enlargement.

The voluntary actions of individuals are under the cognizance and control of Divine Providence. Not a thought rises in the breast which escapes the notice of Omniscience. Not a purpose is formed in the mind which had not previously found its place in the immutable councils of Heaven. Not an action is performed which doth not in its place, and in all its complex connexions and remote consequences, ulti-

mately subserve the plan of Infinite Benevolence. But the wills, the tempers, and the actions of societies, are the wills, the tempers, and the actions of the individuals who compose them; and, consequently, communities of every description, whether small or great, with whatsoever views they may be formed, whatever powers they may possess, by whatever ties they may be connected, through whatever period they may continue, and whatever influence they may have upon the happiness or misery of the rest of mankind, are all the creatures of God, and in their respective spheres and various operations they are subservient to his will, nor can they, upon any occasion, or in any degree, exceed the limits which his wisdom hath prescribed.

The social connexions, which are of the greatest importance in human life, are *domestic, political, and religious*; and it may be of use briefly to trace the governing providence of God in each of these interesting relations.

I. It is God that “setteth the solitary in

families :” he places his human offspring in those circumstances, and implants in their breasts those affections, by which they are prompted to unite in the powerful and endearing bands of *domestic society*.

By the order of Providence the number of which each of these lesser communities is composed is determined and limited. And while some families are destitute of heirs to rescue their names from oblivion, others are blest with a numerous, a vigorous, and a virtuous progeny, to inherit their fortune and their fame, the pride of their delighted parents, and the consolation of their advancing years.

The habits, the actions, and the characters of individuals, originating in the circumstances in which they are placed, and the impressions to which they are exposed, the will of a governing providence is to be acknowledged, whether, on the one hand, in consequence of the infirmities, the vices, or the extravagant passions of its members, the household be a scene of discord, confusion, and wretchedness ; or whether, on the

other, it be an abode of harmony, order, and felicity, as the fruit of prudence, of good temper, of mutual forbearance, and kind affection.

It is the will of Providence that some families should be elevated to notice and distinction, while others pass into obscurity and disgrace. He maketh poor, and he maketh rich. To some are granted the means of opulence, and those habits of sagacity, industry, and economy, which enable them to improve to the best advantage every favourable opportunity, and raise them to the envied summit of wealth and splendour. Others are doomed to poverty and misery, being destitute either of the means of bettering their condition, or of those qualities of mind without which the most splendid external advantages are of no use. Life and death are in the hands of God—health and sickness are at his disposal—all the elements are under his control, and the powers of nature are his varied energy. If numerous families, in their widely extended ramifications, enjoy through a long

series of years the inestimable blessings of health, vigour, and cheerfulness, with little or no interruption, these blessings are the gift of God ; it is he who crowneth each successive year with his goodness. But, on the contrary, if pain or sickness be an inmate in the household, if disastrous accident, or acute disease, derange the animal economy, this is likewise the visitation of God. If death be a frequent and unexpected visitor, not only demanding the aged and infirm, to whom his message would be welcome, but summoning those who least think of it, or can least be spared—if at one time he arrests the father of the family, by whose industry it was supported, by whose prudence it was governed, and by whose virtues it was edified ; if at another time he seizes upon the tender mother, whose fostering care was needful to guard and cherish the helpless years of infancy and childhood, and whose gentle discipline and mild instruction instilled the principles of early piety, and formed the young and pliant mind to wisdom and virtue ; if at another

time the demands of this resistless power are made upon the rising branches of the family, which are torn one after another from the parent stock, till at length the once flourishing and fruitful tree is left a naked and an unsheltered trunk—be it remembered that all this is the work of God, in whose hand is the life of every living thing, and the breath of all mankind. Death is the servant of Providence, who can never act but under orders, nor can in any case exceed the limits of his commission. Events which we ignorantly call fortuitous, and which we erroneously deem avoidable, as well as those which take place in the ordinary and inevitable course of things, were all foreseen, intended, and provided for in the immutable councils of Heaven, and constitute essential parts of that plan which, we are assured, is the wisest and the best.

This view of the divine government, as extending to domestic societies, is highly beneficial and instructive, and cannot fail to excite habitual and active gratitude for domestic blessings. It will likewise draw the

sting of domestic calamity, however complicated, severe, or long-continued. It will soothe and harmonize the mind, and restrain all murmuring and complaint, not by producing a sullen submission to fate that cannot be controlled, and to power that cannot be resisted, but by generating a rational and calm acquiescence in the dispensations of infinite wisdom and benevolence, under a firm conviction that nothing can happen wrong under the divine government, and that the ultimate issue of all will be glorious and happy.

II. The empire of Divine Providence extends to *states and civil communities*.

There is a very just sense, a sense perfectly consistent with the soundest philosophy, and the truest liberty, in which "the powers which be are ordained of God." It is the will of God, because it is essential to the happiness of mankind, that men in a savage and independent state, in which the insecurity of person and of property is inconsistent with all intellectual, moral, and political improvement, should

form themselves into civil communities for the purposes of mutual protection and safety—and whatever be the actual state of society, in nations civilised or uncivilised, it is all the necessary and foreseen result of those circumstances in which such nations were originally placed; and in this view it may be regarded as the appointment of God, that one nation should remain in a barbarous and uncultivated state, almost without the form or appearance of civil union, ranging the forests, or roaming over the plains and deserts like beasts of prey: that another country should groan under the yoke of a devouring despotism, where neither actions, nor words, nor even thoughts are free, and where the most innocent expressions and gestures are interpreted into overt acts of treason and rebellion, and subjected to the most exorbitant penalties: that another should be agitated with all the evils of anarchy, in which the sacred name of liberty is prostituted to the support of tyranny more savage and unrelenting than despotism itself: and to what can it

so justly be ascribed as to the distinguishing favour of the Almighty, that another nation should be blest with a free and a just government, with a mild, a firm, and temperate administration ; in which laws are framed with prudent deliberation, wisely adapted to the exigencies of the state : in which the empire of law extends to every class of society, and the greatest as well as the least are amenable to its control ; in which arbitrary power is unknown, and no authority is acknowledged but that which is supported by law ; in which justice is administered by those whose approved integrity, whose known wisdom and experience, whose high professional character, and whose lofty spirit and independent station best qualify them for the arduous and honourable office, and insure the faithful and impartial discharge of its sacred duties ; in which wicked and violent men are rigidly restrained from perpetrating the mischief which is in their hearts ; while personal security affords the best encouragement to the exertions of human industry

and talent, for enlarging the sphere of science, and for the improvement of the arts which multiply the comforts, and embellish the manners of human life, and which ameliorate the condition of man. "Happy is the nation which is in such a case;" yea, thrice happy, if by the vigour of its councils, and the overruling care of Providence, its prosperity and tranquillity have been secured, while the demon of anarchy was abroad, and states the most prosperous, and empires the most powerful either have sunk under its ponderous and destructive arm; or stood trembling and aghast in fearful suspense, and anxious apprehension of what was still future. If, amidst the general consternation and dismay, the British empire retained its laws, its rights, its religion, its happy constitution, its invaluable liberties; if she could hurl defiance at her enemies who threatened her independence, and crush into the dust the men who would disturb her internal peace, whatever merit belongs, and whatever gratitude is due to subordinate instruments, the chief praise of

this high distinction, of this pre-eminent felicity, is to be ascribed to that guardian power which has so often interposed in behalf of Britain on former occasions, in circumstances the most critical, under apprehensions the most alarming. Who seeth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this?

It is the providence of God which protects infant and feeble communities from hostile invasion, and by the practice of industry, economy, and public virtue, raises them to opulence, power, and consideration; and it is the same almighty will which reduces to imbecility, contempt, and servitude, states that have grown insolent and overbearing by prosperity, and which have enervated themselves by luxury and vice. "He poureth contempt upon princes, and weakeneth the strength of the mighty. He increaseth the nations and destroyeth them, he enlargeth the nations and straiteneth them again."

That the state and character of civil communities, their rise and progress, their

decline and fall, are directly ordered by divine Providence, and form a constituent part of a system planned in the councils of heaven, will be denied by none who believe that God is omniscient, and that all his works were known to him from the creation of the world, unless they are also prepared to maintain that the governor of the universe did not intend that which he distinctly foresaw as the inevitable consequence of his own operations, when it was also in his power, by adopting a different plan, to have produced a different result. The argument is so clear, that in a firm, reflecting, and comprehensive mind, it must produce unhesitating conviction.

And it is a conclusion fraught with the most important and consolatory consequences. If God governs all, we are sure that all is governed *well*. And all the evils which take place in the political system, however numerous and great they may appear to the microscopic eye of man, are, to a being who comprehends universal nature, nothing more than occasional discords in a

grand concert of music, which only serve to enhance the relish, and to mellow the harmony of the whole. All will eventually terminate well, and infinite benevolence, directed by infinite wisdom, shall in the end shine forth with unbounded and unrivalled splendour in all the works of God, and in all the dispensations of his government. "The Lord reigneth ; he is clothed with majesty. In vain do the floods lift up their voice and toss their rebellious waves. The Lord on high is mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, than the mighty waves of the sea. Clouds and darkness are round about him ; but justice and judgment are the pillars of his throne."

III. The empire of Providence extends to religious societies, and governs the affairs of *the church of Christ*.

A congregation of faithful men, associated together for the purposes of Christian worship, is the true definition of a church of Christ, and the universal church consists of the general body of Christian worshippers throughout the world.

Societies of this nature have never been totally extinguished, and never will ; for the church of Christ is built upon a rock, and the gates of hell shall never prevail against it.

The providence of God extends its regard to this important object, and the state of religion in the world at large, the various dispensations under which it has existed, and the interests of every particular religious community, are under the direction of his governing will.

He originally formed men rational beings, capable of religion and virtue, and communicated those notices concerning his attributes and will in the patriarchal age, either by the light of nature or by immediate revelation, which led to a state of knowledge and practice that was best adapted to the infancy of the world.

For wise, but unknown reasons, he permitted the human race to fall into circumstances which produced an almost universal apostacy and idolatry, and in this state of things his wisdom interposed to select

the family of Abraham as an example for the instruction and admonition of the rest of mankind.

In the course of his mysterious providence, and conformably to his wise, but unsearchable councils, he permitted this family and nation to fall into a state of ignorance and vice almost equal to that of their heathen neighbours, and in due time he sent his faithful servant, and beloved son Jesus Christ to instruct and to reform the world, to turn men from darkness to light, and to open a way for the recovery both of Jews and Gentiles to the knowledge of truth, and the practice of duty. He furnished the first teachers of this heavenly doctrine with extraordinary powers, and in the midst of opposition and persecution he crowned their faithful and persevering labours with astonishing success.

It was nevertheless a part of the wise and benevolent plan of his unerring councils, that this pure and sublime doctrine should soon be corrupted and debased, and that in process of time it should be almost annihi-

lated and lost. Yet it pleased him from time to time to raise up faithful and approved witnesses to the cause of truth, who in virtuous succession entered their strong but unavailing protest against the growing corruptions of the christian doctrine, who bore their generous testimony amidst calumny, opposition, and bitter persecution, and many of whom sealed their profession with their blood. The era of the reformation was distinguished by the vigour and success of its opposition to the enormities of the Roman church; and though much was left undone by the great and good men who conducted the opposition to papal tyranny, the grand protestant principle, the right of private judgment, was then triumphantly established, and consecrated and ratified in the blood of thousands of innocent and holy victims.

And in the ages which have succeeded, many illustrious characters have from time to time been raised up by divine Providence, to express their desires, and to exert their efforts, however feeble and ineffectual,

for correcting what still remains amiss, erroneous, or imperfect, and for completing the work which their forefathers so piously and laudably began. Nor has their honourable ministry proved altogether fruitless.

And the christian church, as it now exists in the world, whether in a purer or a more corrupt state, whether in the form of national establishments or of separate and independent societies, remains under the protection of a wise and powerful Providence, whose attention to its interests is not for a moment suspended.

Believing, as we do, upon evidence the most satisfactory, in the universal government of God, and in the absolute perfection of the divine character, the consideration of that providence which he continually exercises over his church is a source of exquisite delight and permanent consolation.

We learn to be satisfied with the effect of our own exertions in the cause of truth and virtue, because we are assured, that whether our success be more or less, it exactly corresponds with the wisdom of the

divine plan, and occupies that space which the general good requires.

We learn to acquiesce in these distinctions and divisions which have at all times prevailed, and do now subsist in the christian church; and while in the exertion of our best talents we endeavour to diffuse the knowledge of christian truth, and the practice of christian duty in that church of which we are members, and which we regard as approximating the nearest to the evangelical standard, we are well satisfied that others should be occupied in different places, and in different ways, in advancing the same important cause, we rejoice in their success, and we do not presume to limit the Arbiter of events to those means and instruments which we judge most becoming and efficacious, and which, therefore, it is our duty to employ.

We are not discouraged at the slow progress of truth and virtue, and the obstruction which they meet with from the prejudices, the interests, and the bad passions of mankind: we do not suspect the truth of

what we have admitted upon the most satisfactory evidence, and after the most diligent inquiry, merely because we see the multitude against us.

Nor are we alarmed at the unusual progress of infidelity and atheism in modern times. With pity, and with wonder, we regard numbers of whom we once entertained better expectations, entangled in the web of artful sophistry, and misled by the illusions of a false philosophy. But we see no reason to forego our confidence in the power of truth, and firmly believing in the divine authority of the christian revelation, we entertain no doubt of its ultimate success.

Lastly, as the christian prophecies have been so distinctly fulfilled in the corruptions of the christian doctrine, and the apostacy of the professing church, we anticipate with pleasing expectation the accomplishment of those sacred oracles which predict the final and universal triumph of the christian religion. And in the exercise of an unwavering faith we fervently pour



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out the petition which we have learned of
our lord and master, “ may thy kingdom
come, and thy will be done on earth as it
is done in heaven !”



SERMON IX.

THE REPORT MADE BY FESTUS TO AGRIPPA OF THE CHARGE AGAINST THE APOSTLE PAUL.

ACTS, xxv. 18, 19.

Against whom, when the accusers stood up, they brought no accusation of such things as I supposed: but had certain questions against him of their own superstition (religion) and of one Jesus who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive.

THESE words are addressed by Festus to king Agrippa, who was at that time making a complimentary visit to the Roman governor at Cesarea, to congratulate him upon his appointment to the province of Judea, and upon his safe arrival in the country. They relate to a charge against the apostle Paul; whom Felix having, in expectation of a bribe, unjustly detained two years in confinement, had now, to pacify the Jews, who were incensed at the tyranny of his administration, left in bonds to the judgment of his successor. Festus

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informs Agrippa that the singular virulence of the Jewish rulers against this prisoner had induced him to embrace the earliest opportunity of inquiring into the nature and malignity of his offences; but what was his astonishment when he found, that instead of charging him with some great political offence, or some gross violation of civil rights, they only accused him of maintaining that a man who had been publicly put to death some years before, was still living.

This he calls a question of their own superstition, or rather of their own religion; for, little as Festus might in his heart respect the Mosaic revelation, he was too accomplished a courtier to use so contemptuous an expression in the presence of Agrippa, who was himself a Jewish prince.

Upon this report of Festus to Agrippa, in connexion with the history in which it is recorded, I now proceed to make some remarks.

I. In the first place, we may observe the *obstinate prejudice* and *savage malignity*:

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of the Jewish priests and rulers against the christian religion, and the first authorized teachers of it.

No sooner had the governor taken possession of his office than the principal magistrates of the Jews, both civil and ecclesiastical, immediately combine to prosecute the impeachment of the venerable prisoner whom Felix had left in bonds; and they embraced the early opportunity of a visit of compliment and curiosity, which Festus made to the metropolis, to bring up their charges against Paul. They first request that he may be removed from Cesarea, where he was then confined, and which was the principal seat of the Roman government, to Jerusalem, piously intending to assassinate him upon the road. Providentially, this nefarious design proved abortive. The governor denied the request, and ordered the attendance of the accusers at Cesarea, whither their officious zeal soon despatched a deputation from their own body, with the orator Tertullus at their head, to prefer an indictment at

the bar of the governor: and many and grievous were the complaints which they alleged against him. But to what did they amount? And what could they prove? Had he violated the laws of his country? Had he infringed the prerogative of the emperor? Had he encroached upon the honours and emoluments of the ecclesiastical establishment?—No. The apostle boldly appeals to his accusers and his judges. Neither against the law of the Jews, neither against the temple, nor yet against Cæsar, have I offended any thing at all. Nor could his enemies invalidate the appeal.

What then was the daring and atrocious crime which called forth these vociferous clamours? this malignant prosecution? this sanguinary conspiracy? The fact was, that the apostle had the confidence to claim, and to exercise the right of obeying the dictates of his own conscience; of dissenting from established modes of worship and formularies of faith; and of worshipping the God of his fathers in a way which his enemies were pleased to stigmatize as schism and heresy.

And though prohibited by penal laws, insulted by interested priests, and persecuted by a deluded populace, he had boldly and publicly taught the gospel with which he had been intrusted. He had not hesitated to declare, and fully and successfully to prove, to the conviction of thousands, and in the presence of hosts of enemies and persecutors, that this very Jesus, whom they had accused as a blasphemer and a traitor, and whom they had crucified as a malefactor, had been raised from the grave, and exalted at the right hand of God, to be a prince and a Saviour. For such reasons did these infatuated priests and rulers, in the madness of their zeal for what they presumed to call the glory of God, and the credit of their religion, first conspire to assassinate this distinguished messenger of Christ, and when they failed in this base design, they laboured to prejudice the Roman governor against him, and by a complication of false and foolish charges to persuade Festus that he had forfeited his life to the justice of his country.

Such was the inveterate malice of his countrymen to this great apostle, to this enlightened, zealous, and divinely authorised teacher of truth and righteousness. Such, in every age, have been the effects of intemperate and misguided zeal, or rather of that bitterness and malignity, which too often assumes the venerable name of zeal for truth and righteousness. So that the phrase, theological hatred, has even passed into a proverb to express the bitterest animosity; to the great scandal of religion, and especially of the christian name.

If then we are Christians indeed, and profess ourselves to be disciples of this eminent apostle and of his great master, let us remember that the first law of our profession is peace and good-will; that one of the first duties incumbent upon us is the firm, open, and fearless profession of christian truth; but without any officious encroachment upon the rights of others, and above all, without presuming to arraign the conduct of those, who, in similar cir-

cumstances, may not feel themselves called upon to act a similar part: and if, in the peaceable profession of christian truth we suffer contempt, desertion, and persecution, it is our duty, like this magnanimous servant of Jesus, to bear with cheerfulness the loss of all things, and even to rejoice and give thanks, if we are counted worthy of enduring hardship in so glorious a cause; but, upon no consideration are we to retaliate the injuries we receive. We must leave to others the unrestrained and unmolested exercise of that right of judgment which we claim for ourselves, as inherent and indefeasible; not insulting our brethren, however erroneous, with contemptuous or opprobrious language; retorting no abuse; mildly instructing those who are willing to learn, and are inclined to listen to argument; and abhorring, and utterly disclaiming all force but that of reason and of truth. These were the weapons to which the christian religion owed its first success after the age of miracles was passed; and to these alone will it stand in-

debted for its final and universal triumph. Let us then, my brethren, put on this panoply, this complete armour of the gospel, that so we may withstand in the evil day, and having done all may stand.

Secondly. Observe the *wise and equitable conduct* of Festus as a governor and judge.

Festus states to king Agrippa that he of course expected the prisoner would be charged with some atrocious civil or political offence; some violation of law, some crime against the person or authority of Cæsar; but what was his astonishment when he found that the man against whom the whole Jewish government had arrayed its force, and whom the priests and rulers were prosecuting to the last extremity, was charged by them with no other crime than one which related to their own speculative theology. This enlightened and philosophic governor would not suffer a man to be impeached at the Roman tribunal on account of his religious principles, nor would he hear of inflicting pains and penalties

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upon a Roman citizen because he was unsound in the faith, and held opinions different from those of the established priesthood. Under his administration he was willing that all who performed their civil duties should enjoy their civil rights, and so long as the public peace was preserved he gave himself no concern about their private speculations, or their religious quarrels.

Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, Acts, xviii., adopted the same liberal and equitable system of government. When the apostle was brought before his tribunal, upon the popular cry of heresy and schism, and his enemies vociferated the usual clamor, this fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to law, the sagacious magistrate would not allow the apostle even to offer his defence, but himself replied to the accusers in a speech which deserves to be held in honorable and everlasting remembrance. "If," says the upright and enlightened judge, "it were a matter of fraud and injustice, reason would that I should bear

with you, but if it be a verbal question, or a curious speculation, I will be no judge in such matters:" and he wisely dismissed the cause.

To the credit of the heathen magistrates it must be acknowledged, that the early Christians were often indebted to their interposition for protection from the furious persecutions of the Jews; and though, when their numbers became sufficiently considerable to attract the attention of the Roman emperors; and when it was discovered that the christian religion waged open war against all other modes of worship, and that its professed object was to exterminate all the long established and highly venerated systems of polytheism and idolatry, the Christians were exposed to many severe and bloody persecutions; yet it is a fact too palpable to be denied, that heathens never persecuted Christians with that remorseless and unrelenting cruelty with which men professing the Christian name have persecuted each other. In the Netherlands alone, and in the single

reign of the Emperor Charles V. it has been computed that more christian blood was shed on a religious account, than in all the ten famous persecutions of heathen Rome.

But, oh! that christian magistrates, in all ages, had been as equitable and as candid as these enlightened and philosophic Romans. Oh! that, like Festus and Gallio, they had ever been cautious of interfering in cases of theological controversy, in vain questions of superstition, and in the sacred rights of conscience. What cruel persecutions would have been spared! what sanguinary civil commotions would have been prevented! what deluges of human blood would have been saved! In what purity, and to what extent, would the divine light of the gospel have beamed abroad, unsullied by human mixtures, and undebased by popular corruptions!

Thirdly, Mark the *contempt in which the christian religion is held* by those who are ignorant of its true nature and design.

The Roman governor, who, no doubt, professed to be the worshipper of his coun-

try's gods; who was, perhaps, a sceptic; who was certainly a man of an enlarged and liberal mind; and who, probably, held in contempt all the objects of popular superstition; who also appears to have been an utter stranger to the laws and traditions of the Jews; seems to have been greatly astonished and amused at the malignity and fury with which the leaders of the Jewish church and state prosecuted a man for an assertion, which, in the estimation of Festus, proved him to be a fitter object for an asylum of lunatics than for a public prosecution. It was a question about *one* Jesus, who was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive. A notable question, truly, to be brought before the Roman tribunal, to be made the subject of a grave charge, and of a capital indictment, for which the prisoner had been kept two years in confinement, and, to save his life, had now thought himself obliged to appeal to Cæsar. The rancour of the prosecutors, and the pertinacity of the pri-

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soner, in a question apparently so extravagant, and of so little moment, must have appeared equally inexplicable to this incredulous and philosophic judge. Well might he be at a loss what to write to the emperor upon a subject so singular and unprecedented ; and, in his own judgment, so truly ridiculous and absurd.

Oh Festus ! little didst thou suspect thine own deep interest in this apparently trivial and extravagant question. Little wert thou aware that this Jesus, of whom thou speakest with such an affectation of contempt, who had indeed been dead, but who, as his persecuted apostle truly and earnestly affirmed, was then alive, was a personage of the most exalted dignity, the chosen son of God, the faithful messenger of truth, the divinely appointed instructor and Saviour of the world, and that all hope of future existence rests upon his doctrine and resurrection. Little didst thou apprehend that the venerable prisoner whom thou rudely chargedst as a lunatic,

was his authorised ambassador to publish his doctrine to all nations, and to defend his cause before governors and kings.

Had Festus condescended to examine this question with the attention to which it is entitled, had he vouchsafed to listen to those words of truth and soberness which his illustrious prisoner would gladly have imparted, he would probably have learned, like that prisoner, to have revered the doctrine which he now slighted, and to have looked for salvation to that Jesus whom he now rejected with scorn.

But such is the prevailing folly of mankind. They judge with partiality and prejudice. Seldom do they inquire after truth with a humble and a candid mind; and what they do not understand they are prone to despise.

And this is peculiarly observable where religion is in question. Whence does it arise that the christian religion is so little esteemed, and the serious and sincere profession of it is so often the object of a

sneer among men who set themselves up as the oracles of wisdom and philosophy; the great, the learned, and the wise; who scarcely regard a true believer as a man of a sound understanding? The fact is, that such persons are either too indolent to examine, or too prejudiced to form a correct judgment. And assuming, as they commonly and naturally do, that the established systems of faith are genuine Christianity, they readily and justly conclude that such a religion can never claim God for its author.

Let not this be our condemnation. Let us maintain a severe guard against prejudice of every kind. Let us be cautious in our judgments, and in our censures. Let us not underrate any thing, merely because we do not understand it. Let us not be hasty in forming a decision upon subjects of importance, and before we have obtained the proper means of information, or taken time sufficient to inquire.

Let us especially guard against this pragmatistical spirit in the concerns of reli-

gion; nor let us, at any time, treat those with contempt who hold sentiments different from our own. It is not handsome, it is not candid, it is not christian to represent modes and opinions different from those which we profess, as questions of mean superstition, or as notions which are fit for none but idiots or madmen. Others may, perhaps, have better reasons for their opinions than we are acquainted with; and till we prove our own infallibility, it becomes us to think and speak with modesty and reserve; and, as others differ from us no further than we from them, we ought in all reason to treat the opinions which they hold to be true and important, with the same tenderness and respect with which we desire that our own may be treated by them. If we take it ill to be regarded with unkindness, and to be treated with harshness, because of the opinions which we embrace, in consequence of the freedom of our inquiries, let us beware that we do not provoke this treatment by any unbecoming asperity in our own lan-

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guage and behaviour. Let every one be ambitious to demonstrate the excellence of his system by the moderation of his language, the gentleness of his manners, the beauty of his example, and the dignity of his character.

Learn to set a just value on the christian revelation. If we understand it rightly, we must esteem it highly; and we shall reckon the gospel as our chief treasure. It is indeed the pearl of great price, for the purchase of which it is worth while to part with all that we have. I am free to acknowledge, for my own part, that I see no other ground on which to build the hope of a future life but the revelation of the gospel. If that fail us, all is lost. But if Jesus died and rose again, we are assured that those also who are asleep, the dead of all ages and generations, will God bring with him; and because he lives we shall live also. And I bless God, that the evidence of that all-important fact, the resurrection of Jesus, is such as to warrant the most satisfactory practical assent. After

the maturest deliberation, I am convinced that it would be the extreme of folly to act upon the supposition that Christianity is untrue: and by the help of God, no secular consideration, no scoffs of infidelity, no violence of persecution, shall ever induce me to let go this anchor of my hope. And I trust that I am now speaking the language and the feelings of all who hear me.

Nevertheless we are not to wonder if many despise and reject the christian doctrine; nor ought we to be discouraged on this account. It is owing, either to ignorance, or to some unhappy prepossession. They have not duly considered, nor impartially examined the subject. What, though like the priests they be men of learning, or noble, like Agrippa, or powerful, like Festus, yet, if they reject Christianity, they are ignorant of that which it most concerns them to know, and are destitute of the one thing needful, of the best balm and consolation of human life. Let such persons, if they please, sneer and

scoff at the christian religion. Let them represent its serious professors as hypocrites, or fanatics. He must possess a very feeble mind who can be influenced by such pointless ridicule to abandon his profession; and that man must be very deficient in the christian temper who can repel these attacks with any other weapons than powerful argument and mild expostulation, thus endeavouring to convince these rash and violent assailants, that Christianity is the most rational system in the world, and that the pure, uncorrupted religion of Jesus is the truest and most sublime philosophy.

Fourthly, We learn *the true summary of the apostle's doctrine.*

And that is, that Jesus was dead, and is alive. This it seems was the sum and substance of the charge which the great men of the Jewish nation, the priests and rulers, had to exhibit against their state prisoner, the man whom they arraigned at Cæsar's tribunal of blasphemy and treason; a charge to which the venerable pri-

soner would readily plead guilty, and which indeed he frankly avowed in his defence before king Agrippa; and for which the incredulous governor rudely charged him with insanity.

And this fact is, in truth, the main pillar upon which Christianity rests; the precious and chief corner-stone which supports and binds together the whole framework of the building. All the discoveries, and all the privileges and blessings of the Christian revelation center in these two facts, that Jesus *was dead* and *is alive*.

First, The apostle taught that Jesus had been *dead*. This he asserted as a notorious and indisputable fact, which indeed no one was disposed to controvert. He was put to death by his enemies: he was publicly crucified as a malefactor: thousands were witnesses to his expiring agonies: and his death was officially certified by his executioners to the governor. These were remarkable circumstances, and wisely ordered by divine Providence to obviate the sus-

picion, and even to prevent the possibility of collusion.

Secondly, The apostle also affirmed that Jesus, who had been dead, *was now alive*. This was the rock of offence: to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Greeks foolishness.

That the culprit who expired upon the cross was the promised Messiah, the deliverer of Israel, the anointed king of the chosen people of God, whose advent had been foretold in the magnificent language of prophecy, was a mortifying doctrine, to which the prejudiced Jew, bred up with far different views and expectations, could not listen but with indignation and horror. That a dead man had been restored to life was a tale which naturally excited in the sceptical Gentile a smile of contempt.

Yet this was the fact which the venerable apostle peremptorily affirmed, and steadily and zealously persisted in, at the hazard of his worldly all, his reputation, his liberty, and his life. And his constancy and zeal,

however it might be taunted as an object of ridicule by some, and of reproach by others, were in the highest degree reasonable and commendable. For the fact was capable of the most satisfactory proof, and the belief of it was of the most interesting importance.

That Jesus was actually raised from the dead, was fully proved by his repeated personal appearance to those who, having been most conversant with him, were best qualified to ascertain the fact: first, to the women who had been his attendants, and whom he had miraculously healed: then to Peter and James: afterwards to all the apostles, at different times, for the space of forty days: and again in Galilee, to more than five hundred disciples at once: and last of all to the apostle Paul himself, as to one born out of due time, as he himself expresses it. And the testimony of these faithful witnesses was confirmed to the world by the effusion of the Holy Spirit, and the miracles which they were authorized to perform in the name of Jesus. Evidence more

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satisfactory than this cannot even be conceived by the imagination. It operated conviction in the hearts of thousands. Many of whom bore their public testimony to the truth; and sealed that testimony with their blood.

The consequences of this joyful event are of the highest moment. The resurrection of Jesus fulfilled the scriptures, confirmed his divine mission, and constitute the proof, the pattern, and the pledge of the resurrection of all his faithful followers. Because he lives, we shall live also.

If then, Christians, we are convinced of the certainty of these facts, which constituted the leading topics of the apostle's preaching, and which do indeed lie at the foundation of all Christian hope, let us act up to the conviction of our understandings. Let us joyfully celebrate the weekly and the annual festivals which bring to our remembrance this great event, the resurrection of our exalted Master. Let us live as those who have immortality in view. Neither mourning over our departed friends

as others who have no hope, nor alarmed beyond reason at the prospect of our own approaching dissolution : anxious for nothing but to secure the approbation of our final Judge : and humbly, but cheerfully hoping that he who raised up Christ Jesus from the dead, will raise up us also by Jesus, to a new, a happy, and immortal life.



SERMON X.

OBSERVATIONS UPON THE CHARACTER AND CRIME OF JUDAS.

PART THE FIRST.

MATTHEW, xxvii. 3.

*Then Judas, who had betrayed him, when he saw that he
was condemned, repented himself.*

THE character and fate of this false and traitorous apostle suggests to a serious and thinking mind many useful reflections, and the case does not appear to me to be commonly regarded in its true and proper light. I propose, therefore, to offer to your attention some general observations upon the character of Judas Iscariot—upon his call to the apostolic office—upon his crime in betraying his master—upon our Lord's prediction of this event—and upon the guilt imputable to the traitor, notwithstanding the predestination of the crime. I shall

inquire, whether he was admitted to the participation of the eucharistic ordinance—and likewise into his penitence—and his death. I propose also, to make some observations upon the value of his testimony to the character of Christ—and, lastly, to point out the proper improvement of his melancholy history.

1. The *character* of Judas was plainly that of an avaricious man, in whose breast the love of money was the predominant passion. Of this we have two proofs upon record. The first is John, xii. 2. When Mary, the sister of Lazarus, in grateful veneration anointed the feet of Jesus with a costly perfume, and wiped them with the tresses of her hair, Judas reproved her for it; “Why,” said he, “was not this ointment sold for three hundred pence, and given to the poor?” Upon which the evangelical historian remarks, that “he said this, not that he cared for the poor, but because he was a thief, and had the bag, and bare what was put therein.”

The second is the memorable instance of

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delivering up Jesus for thirty pieces of silver.

It is plain, therefore, that the love of money prompted this base man both to rob the poor, and to betray his master. And that he was an avaricious man before he became an apostle, is evident from the consideration, that avarice is a passion that does not start up instantaneously, but is generated by slow process, and requires length of time to raise it to that degree in which it manifested itself in him.

It does not, however, appear, that Judas was a man of a sanguinary disposition. Had this been his known character, he never would have been joined to the college of apostles. And it does not often happen that lovers of money are men of blood. Avarice is a timid vice, and though it prompts men to trick, and shuffle, and over-reach, and steal, and even to betray their best friends, it generally shrinks from carnage and blood.

It is further evident, that though the love of money was the governing principle in

the heart of Judas, he was not openly profligate and rapacious, but must have maintained a decent external character, and have preserved himself in a great measure free from suspicion, at least, of any dishonesty ; for otherwise he never would have been associated among the followers of Jesus, and least of all would he have been entrusted with the care of the common purse. And during the whole of his connexion with the apostles, his conduct was so guarded that when Jesus directed him to finish his business quickly, meaning his traitorous design, the apostles themselves had no suspicion of it, but thought that their master's words were either a direction to prepare for the feast, or to distribute something to the poor.

2. It may be asked, *What could induce Jesus* to introduce a person of this character into the society of his apostles ?

And the most obvious answer to this question would be, that our Lord himself might think too favourably of his character, and might admit him into his society, not know-



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ing the sordidness of his mind till it was afterwards revealed to him.

But we seem precluded from this answer by an observation of the evangelist John, ii. 24, 25. "He knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man." And many instances occur in his history, in which it appears that our Lord was acquainted with the thoughts and purposes of his apostles, of his enemies, and of all who were about him ; and what is still more to the present purpose, the apostle John assures us (vi. 64), that Jesus, very early in the course of his ministry, while he was yet in Galilee, declared the faithlessness, and predicted the treachery of Judas ; "for," adds the sacred historian, "Jesus knew from the beginning," that is, from the beginning of his ministry, as this phrase almost universally signifies in the writings of this apostle, "who they were that believed not, and who should betray him."

It seems, therefore, upon the whole, reasonable to conclude, that having a distinct

foresight of his sufferings from the beginning of his ministry, and knowing the part which this faithless disciple was destined to take in them, though he knew his character, and knew the fatal issue of his connexion with him, he invited him into the society of his apostles for the purpose of fulfilling the dreadful part which was assigned him in the approaching tragedy.

3. The *crime* of Judas does not appear to me to be in general rightly understood.

It is usually supposed, that such was the mercenary and sanguinary spirit of this vile traitor, that for the paltry bribe of thirty pieces of silver, he formed the deliberate purpose of betraying his master into the hands of his implacable enemies and murderers. But this seems to be extravagant and impossible. That a man, who must have maintained a very decent character at least, and who therefore could not be notoriously profligate, should for a trifling bribe be deliberately accessory to the murder of one, whom he knew to be a most excellent and perfect character, whose nu-

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merous miracles and accomplished prophecies decidedly marked him out as a divine teacher, and who had graciously admitted himself to the most familiar intercourse with him, that such a man should at once have committed so flagrant a crime, violates all probability. It is inconsistent with the established principles of human nature, and is an instance of villainy unparalleled in the annals of the world.

It is a miserable way of accounting for this fact to say, that it was owing to the instigation of Satan, who, after Judas had received the sop, entered into his heart, and prompted him to the commission of the crime. It needs but little acquaintance with scripture phraseology to understand, that by the expression of the devil entering into his heart, or putting it into his heart, nothing more is intended, than that his own wicked disposition prompted him to the deed. Accordingly, the expression used by our Lord, John, vi. 70, is, "Have I not chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil;" that is, will prove a wicked, treacher-

ous, and false accuser. And it was this devil that put it into his heart to betray his master, that is, his own wicked passions prompted him to the crime.

And, indeed, if there was such an omnipotent, omnipresent Being as many suppose the devil to be, who entered into the heart of Judas, and irresistibly directed his will and his actions upon this occasion, the crime and the responsibility of the traitor would be entirely lost, which is contrary to the whole tenor of the history—and, I trust, my christian friends, that we are sufficiently apprised, that there is no such being as the devil, a mighty, invisible, and powerful spirit, who shares with the Supreme in the government of the universe, and whose whole employment and delight is doing mischief. This solution, therefore, cannot be admitted.

The truth appears to be this—that though our Lord had repeatedly, and in the most explicit terms, foretold his death by the hands of his enemies, neither Judas, nor any of the other apostles, believed that this

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event would really take place; but they probably understood the prophecy of some temporary depression of his cause, for when he was actually seized, they all deserted him. And when he was crucified, they abandoned all expectation of deliverance by him. And though he had foretold his resurrection as expressly as his death, they do not seem to have entertained any hope of it. Nor would they give credit to those who first reported that joyful event, but regarded their words as "idle tales," till Jesus himself appeared, and in person removed their doubts.

Judas was probably as incredulous with regard to his personal sufferings and death, as the other apostles. There is no reason to think that he had not a high esteem and affection for his master, or that he would have been unwilling to make great sacrifices, if he had thought that Jesus had been in any real danger. We are sure, indeed, from his confession to the chief priests, that no person entertained a more just sense of the perfect character of Jesus than this false

traitor. But the love of money was the base disciple's predominant passion, and he hoped that he could obtain his end without exposing his master to any personal risk. He knew the miraculous power that Jesus possessed—he knew that he was able at pleasure to extricate himself from the extremest danger—he had been witness to this at Nazareth, where he had made himself invisible to the people who attempted to cast him down from a rock—he had witnessed a similar miracle at Jerusalem, where our Lord miraculously escaped from those who took up stones to stone him—and this selfish wretch no doubt flattered himself with the hope, that when he had betrayed his master with a kiss, Jesus would, by a similar miracle, again escape from his enemies, or that he would, as upon a former occasion, strike with supernatural awe those who came to apprehend him, and send them back to their employers with their business unaccomplished. Thus he fondly flattered himself, that his reward would be secure, and his master unhurt. This is the only

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supposition that makes the conduct of Judas in the least degree natural and probable, and which renders the history credible ; and the sequel of the story proves this supposition to be true. The traitor watched the issue through all the circumstances of indignity and insult which took place after the apprehension of Jesus, expecting no doubt every instant, that he would liberate himself by miracle, till he heard the sentence of condemnation passed, and saw him led to execution, and then, finding the event so contrary to his expectations, he could no longer bear the upbraidings of his mind, he makes confession of his guilt, flings down the reward of his treason, bears ample testimony to the innocence of his betrayed and injured master, and in the agony of his heart puts an end to his life.

According to this account the whole history proceeds in a regular, natural, and probable train ; but if Judas had been sufficiently abandoned and hardened deliberately to intend the death of his master, it is hardly to be imagined that he should

have been so soon overtaken with the horrors of remorse.

4. This treachery of Judas *was repeatedly predicted* by Jesus in the course of his ministry, and especially at the last passover, and immediately before the event took place.

The apostle John expressly saith,* that he knew from the beginning who should betray him; and Matthew writes,† that even while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, “The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men.”

But the manner in which he designated the traitor at the paschal feast is related by all the four evangelists with some little difference in the circumstances.

The evangelist Luke relates,‡ that while they were at table, our Lord said to his disciples, “Behold the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table, and truly the Son of man goeth as it was determined: but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed!” and they began to inquire

* John, vi. 64. † Matt. xvii. 22. ‡ Luke, xxii. 21.

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among themselves which of them it was that should do this thing. Matthew and Mark add, that each of them put the question to our Lord himself; one said, is it I? and another said, Lord, is it I? To which Jesus replied, "he that dippeth his hand with me in the dish shall betray me." After which Judas said to him, is it I? to which Jesus assented. Had this transaction passed exactly in the manner that these evangelists relate, the rest of the disciples could not possibly have been at a loss to explain the meaning of our Lord's words to Judas, when he left the room.

The apostle John has given a more detailed and more probable account than either of these. He relates, that when Jesus had declared that one of the company should betray him, and the disciples looked one at another, doubting of whom he spake, Simon Peter beckoned to the apostle John himself, who was placed next to Jesus at the table, and who, according to the inconvenient posture of the age, leaned on his bosom, to inquire, probably in a whisper,

who the traitor was; and to him alone our Lord declared, probably in a tone of voice not to be heard by the rest, "he it is to whom I shall give a sop when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, he gave it to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon." From this account it should seem, that none of the apostles but John and Peter knew who the traitor was. And Judas, moved with indignation and conscious guilt, which the evangelist expresses by the phrase, "Satan entering into his heart," rising immediately from the table, went out; at which time our Lord said unto him, "what thou doest, do quickly," which the candour of the other disciples, who were not apprized of the circumstance, and to whom his previous conduct had afforded no reasonable ground of suspicion, interpreted as a direction to provide necessaries for the feast, or to distribute something to the poor.

And this appears to be one of those cases of minute variation in the evangelical historians, which, while it must, in the esteem

of every judicious reader, entirely overthrow all pretension to plenary inspiration, adds to the general credibility of the history, as it affords a clear proof that the writers are independent witnesses, who did not copy from each other. Mark and Luke were not present at the time; and Matthew might either be at some distance, or in a situation not convenient for observation. John, who was himself a party personally concerned, the very disciple who put the question to Jesus, in consequence of the hint given to him by Peter, and who received our Lord's answer, must necessarily be the best informed, and his account is unquestionably the most authentic.

5. It has been doubted *whether Judas retired before the institution of the eucharist*, or whether he was admitted to the participation of that rite.

If no account of this transaction were extant but that of Luke, we should conclude that the traitor did not leave the company till after the institution of the eucharist, for immediately after the institution our Lord

remarks, "behold, the hand of him that betrayeth me is with me on the table." But it hardly seems probable that Judas would have been invited to partake of a rite, which implies in the worthy communicant a speculative faith in Christ, or at least no hostile disposition towards him, at the time when he was meditating to deliver him up to his adversaries; and the misplacing of this circumstance is not the only inaccuracy chargeable upon this portion of Luke's history, which is, nevertheless, in the main not only an authentic record, but an admirable composition. The evangelist John unquestionably knowing that the other three had related the institution of the eucharist at large, gives no account of it himself; but he relates, that the traitor retired immediately after receiving the sop. And Matthew, who was present, and Mark, who had his account from Peter, both relate the institution of the eucharist after the detection of the traitor, though they say nothing of the time when he left the room. It seems therefore probable, that Jesus

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having in general terms announced that he should be betrayed by one of the company then present, having secretly informed John and Peter who the traitor was, and having sufficiently notified to Judas himself, that he was acquainted with his base purpose, the traitor, full of indignation, withdrew, and our Lord then proceeded to predict the desertion of his disciples, and the fall and recovery of the apostle Peter; after which he instituted the ordinance that was designed to commemorate his death.

This question is of no further practical use than as the admission of Judas to participate in the rite, would seem to countenance the admission of persons of all principles and characters to partake of this christian institution; than which nothing would be more improper or indecent; whoever professes, and speculatively believes the christian religion, and maintains a character not grossly inconsistent with his profession, is in duty bound to make this public profession of his faith, and chil-

dren ought by all means to be brought to the Lord's table, in the same manner as to other christian ordinances, when they can attend there with decency ; but professed unbelievers can never desire to attend, and persons of profligate characters ought not to be tolerated in christian societies ; with such persons, says the apostle, " we are not even to eat," that is, to unite in any act of christian fellowship.*

6. It is worthy of remark, that though the Scripture represents the treachery of Judas as both *predicted* and *fore-ordained*, it nevertheless declares him to have been *highly criminal and justly punishable* for his wickedness.

" The son of man," saith our Lord, in the evangelists Matthew and Mark, " goeth as it was written of him." Luke's expression is still stronger, " he goeth as it was *determined*, but woe unto that man by whom he is betrayed, it had been good for that man if he had never been born." And similar to this is the apostle Peter's lan-

* 1 Cor. v. 11.

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guage in the Acts.* “Him being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain.”

It is a considerable difficulty, and has always been considered as such, to explain how an action should be represented as predestinated, and yet at the same time be criminal and punishable. Some have cut the knot by maintaining, that all voluntary actions predicted by God, are so necessitated, that however criminal in their nature, the responsibility of the agent is, in that case, suspended, and no punishment can be justly inflicted. But this is directly contrary to the declaration of Scripture, which uniformly represents the obstinacy of Pharaoh, and the treachery of Judas, though predicted, as crimes of the deepest dye, and deserving the severest punishment. Others have endeavoured to solve the difficulty by vainly labouring to reconcile the prescience of God with the supposed free will of man, which is nothing

* Acts, ii. 23.

less than endeavouring to prove a contradiction to be true.

The fact is, that though the writers of the Scripture were not themselves philosophers, their language is perfectly consistent with the truest and the soundest philosophy of morals and of mind. The merit or demerit of an action has no relation to the certainty or the uncertainty of its event. They depend wholly upon its nature and tendency, and the moral quality of the action takes its complexion entirely from the moral quality of the motive. For in the sight of God, and in the constitution of things, all events are and must be equally certain, and nothing can happen different from what is foreseen, permitted, and in the language of Scripture and of true philosophy, ordained by the all-wise, all-comprehending mind of the Supreme Being. Judas's treachery arose from a mean, a sordid, and avaricious spirit, which stopped at no injustice in order to attain its own base and unworthy ends. It was, therefore, criminal in the highest degree, and as such justly deserving of punishment, not indeed

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a vindictive punishment, for no such punishment can exist under the government of infinite benevolence. Suffering inflicted without any beneficial design is unjust and unworthy of God; but sufferings inflicted to reclaim the sufferer, or to warn others, though severe and long continued, are not only consistent with, but are the result of perfect wisdom, justice, and benevolence. Such was that punishment which awaited the traitor, and which, no doubt, when his heart was wrung with anguish at the reflection of what he had done, extorted from him the bitter exclamation, "that it would have been better for him never to have been born." And this prompted him to lay violent hands upon himself, and to abandon that existence, the burden of which he could no longer endure: by which he has left an awful memorial that the best institutions, the most perfect example, the most virtuous society, and the most efficacious means of improvement, will not always secure men from the perpetration of the most odious crimes.



SERMON XI.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHARACTER, CRIME, AND
FATE OF JUDAS.

PART THE SECOND.

MATTHEW, xxvii. 3.

*Then Judas, who had betrayed him, when he saw that he
was condemned, repented himself.*

THIS false apostle was a native of Iscarioth, a town in Galilee, and it is by this title that he is usually distinguished from another apostle of the same name, the brother of James, and a near relation of Jesus.

Of this infatuated and abandoned man we have already taken a former occasion to observe, that avarice was the predominant feature of his character; but, that there is no reason to think that he was a man of a sanguinary disposition.

That our Lord associated him into the

company of his apostles with a clear foresight of the treacherous part he was to act, and in order to accomplish the designs of Providence.

That this foolish and wicked disciple betrayed his master into the hands of his enemies for a trifling bribe, not intending any personal injury to him ; but fully expecting that he would rescue himself, as he had repeatedly done, by an exertion of his miraculous power.

That this treachery of Judas had been often foretold by Jesus in the course of his ministry, and particularly at his last pass-over, where he first gave a general intimation to his disciples that one of the company would betray him ; after which, he privately specified to Peter and John the person of the traitor ; and lastly indicated it so distinctly to Judas himself, though not so openly as to be understood by the other disciples, as obliged him to rise up and leave the room.

That he retired probably before the in-

stitution of the eucharist, and without participating in that sacred pledge of fidelity and affection.

Also, that the Scriptures justly represent the conduct of Judas as in the highest degree criminal and worthy of punishment, though it was predicted and predestinated to take place.

I now propose to make two additional observations, and to conclude with some practical reflections.

I. The Evangelists, Matthew and Luke, record, or are supposed to record, *the remorse with which* this unhappy man was overtaken, and the fatal consequence which ensued.

Matthew relates, that when Judas, who betrayed him, saw that he was condemned, he repented himself. He watched the issue of the business, expecting, no doubt, every moment, that his master, by the exertion of his miraculous power, would effect his escape, as at other times. But his hour was come; and though Jesus had the same power of confounding his adver-

saries, of disarming their malice, or of eluding their pursuit, as before, he voluntarily submitted to an ignominious and painful death, in order to fulfil his Father's pleasure, and to accomplish the great purpose of his mission and ministry. But when Judas saw that sentence of condemnation was passed by the chief priests and council, and that Jesus was about to be led to execution, being disappointed in all his expectations, his mind was pierced with the most cutting remorse, when he considered how base, how unjust, how ungenerous, and how impious a part he had acted in being accessory to the death of so innocent and holy a person, so kind a friend, so generous a master, so distinguished a prophet, and divinely inspired teacher,—and, wrung with anguish, he hastened to the council-chamber, made confession of his guilt, and threw up the wages of iniquity.

The evangelist adds: “He brought the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, saying, I have sinned in that I

have betrayed innocent blood: and they said, what is that to us, see thou to that: and he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself. And the chief priests took the pieces of silver, and said, it is not lawful to put them into the treasury, because it is the price of blood; and they took counsel, and bought with them the potter's field to bury strangers in. Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by the prophet, saying, and they took the thirty pieces of silver, the price of him that was valued, whom the children of Israel did value, and gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord appointed me."

Another account of this transaction is given, Acts, i. 16, &c. where the apostle Peter, proposing to elect a successor in the room of this wicked and unhappy traitor, expresses himself in this manner: "The Scripture, which the holy spirit spake before by the mouth of David, must needs have been fulfilled concerning Judas, for he was numbered with us, and had part of

this ministry." Upon which the historian, or more probably some other person, introduces the following remark, ver. 18, 19, "This man truly purchased a field with the reward of his iniquity, (and falling headlong, he burst asunder in the midst, and all his bowels were poured out) and it was known to all the dwellers in Jerusalem, insomuch that the field was called, in their proper tongue, Aceldama, that is to say, the field of blood."

This account in the history of the Acts has much the appearance of interpolation, and the attempts which learned and ingenious men have made to reconcile it to the history in Matthew, and even to probability, have not been successful. It is introduced very abruptly, and interrupts the thread of Peter's harangue. It relates, that Judas himself purchased a field, and that he lost his life in that field, in the miserable manner there described, from whence it took the name of the field of blood, which is contradictory to the more probable account given by Matthew, viz.

that he threw down the money in the temple, after a confession of his guilt to the priests and elders, and immediately departed and hanged himself—and that these holy men, the delicacy of whose conscience would not permit them to receive back into the temple treasury the price of blood, purchased with it the potter's field for the burial of strangers.

It has indeed been said* by those who wish to reconcile the two histories, that a man is often represented as doing that which he is only the cause or occasion of another's doing. So Jeroboam is said to have made Israel to sin;† and the Jews, by wicked hands, to have crucified Christ.‡ But this expression seems to be used only when what is done was intended by the person to whom it is ascribed, though not his immediate act. Judas, therefore, cannot, with propriety, be said to have purchased the field, for it was bought by

* Vide Bishop Pearce. † 1 Kings, xiv. 16.

‡ Acts, ii. 13.

the priests with the money that he threw back.

Upon the whole, it seems probable that some honest, but ill-informed person, wrote the two verses in question in the margin of an early copy of the book of Acts, which some injudicious transcriber afterwards introduced into the text; of which practice it is well known there are other instances in the New Testament. If this was the fact, we need give ourselves no further trouble to reconcile the two accounts, but may satisfy ourselves with that of Matthew, which indeed is clear, consistent, and probable.

When Judas saw that his master was condemned, and his death determined upon, he came to the chief priests, probably before they had left the temple, to deliver up Jesus to the Roman governor, made confession of his guilt, bore testimony to the innocence of his injured and betrayed master, threw down the wages of his iniquity, and went immediately and

hanged himself, being probably dead before his master was crucified; soon after which the money was applied by the priests in the way which the history relates.

It has been argued by some, that the evangelist does not say that Judas laid violent hands on himself, but that he died of grief, or, as it is commonly expressed, of a broken heart; and the evangelist's words will, perhaps, bear that sense, which, however, is acknowledged to be a very unusual one, and there seems no sufficient reason to depart from the commonly received interpretation, especially as this supposition affords little assistance towards reconciling the inconsistent accounts of the death of Judas by Matthew and Luke, or rather Luke's interpolator.

The evangelist, Matthew, in his usual way, represents the purchase of the potter's field with the thirty pieces of silver, as an accomplishment of a prophecy of Jeremiah. The words which the evangelist quotes are not found in Jeremiah, but in

Zachariah, xi. 12, 13. This mistake is owing, either to an oversight of the evangelist, which is not probable, for he seldom cites a prophet by name; or to the inattention of some transcriber; or, as some not improbably conjecture, the last six chapters in Zechariah, which are written in a style different from the rest of the book, were originally found in Jeremiah. It is not material which of these suppositions is the true one. The prophetic words, as usual, are only accommodated to the case of Judas, and are not intended to be represented as a direct prophecy of the fact here recorded. The prophet is commanded by God to assume the character of a shepherd; and he requires, that the Jews should give him the proper price of a wise and faithful shepherd, instead of which they offer him only thirty pieces of silver, which was the price of a common slave.* This sum he is forbidden to accept, and is commanded to give it to the potter, probably to some of the Levites, who were

* Newcome in loc.

employed in that business, for the service of the temple. "Then I said to them, if it seem good in your eyes, give me my price, but if not, forbear: so they weighed thirty pieces of silver; and Jehovah said unto me, cast it unto the potter, a goodly price at which I have been prized by them. Then I took the thirty pieces of silver and cast them into the house of Jehovah unto the potter."

It is remarkable, that Jehovah here speaks of that which was done to his servant, the prophet, as done to himself; and the evangelist applies the prophecy as descriptive of the contemptuous treatment which Jesus received, being sold at the price of a slave, and of the use to which the price of treachery was applied.

II. Let us now consider *the value of the attestation* borne to *the character* of his injured master. "He said to the chief priests and elders, I have sinned in that I have betrayed *innocent blood*, and he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself."

This declaration of Judas has been offered by some as a strong argument in favour of the character of Jesus, and of the divinity of his doctrine. We have here, it is said, the confession of an enemy, of the man who betrayed him, who was urged by every motive of inclination, of honour, and of interest, to have detected the crime of the man whom he had delivered up to public justice if he knew of any, and to bring forward every instance of fraud and imposture, every appearance of artifice and falsehood, in order to serve as a plausible pretext to his own perfidious treason. He was one of the intimate friends, the chosen companion of Jesus, he was witness to all his miracles, he had heard all his discourses, he had attended his confidential communications, he knew all his designs, and was acquainted with the real, as well as with the professed object of his public ministry. If there had been any thing amiss in his conversation, in his conduct, in his most retired scenes, his most unguarded moments, this faithless disciple must have known it all ; and every

motive, which can influence human nature, urged him to disclose it, duty to God, benevolence to men, justice to his country, the indispensable obligation to detect an impious fraud, self-interest, his predominant passion, regard to his own reputation, and the ambition of ingratiating himself both with the capricious multitude and the men in power, all concurred to induce him to make the grand discovery.

But what was his actual conduct? The reverse of this. Apprized of the unimpeachable character of his master, and convinced of the divinity of his mission, conscious of his own baseness, ingratitude, accumulated and unpardonable guilt, he rushes, uncalled, into the presence of those who were the instigators of his crime, and in accents of horror he exclaims, "I have sinned, I have betrayed innocent blood;" and when he saw that his efforts to undo the mischief he had wrought, and to save his injured master from a public execution, were fruitless, in the agony of despair he puts an end to his existence. What stronger

testimony can be borne to the divine mission of Jesus, and to the excellency of his character?

I believe I have done justice to this celebrated argument; and certainly the conduct of Judas, as stated by the evangelist, is calculated to make a lively impression upon the minds of those who are previously convinced of the truth of the history, and of the divinity of the mission of Jesus.

But it is not an argument that would make a considerable impression upon an unbeliever. The testimony of an enemy is unquestionably one of the strongest evidences that can be produced in proof of any fact. The attestation which Pliny bears to the piety, the zeal, the benevolence, the justice, the fortitude of the primitive Christians, is an argument which must impress every inquisitive and impartial mind. And if the perfidious apostle had left behind him, in writing, a solemn attestation to the character of the master whom he injured and betrayed, and if we had the same evidence of the genuineness

and the authority of this work, that we have of the epistles of Pliny, or the histories of the evangelists, this would indeed have been a most convincing and triumphant argument in favour of the divine authority of the christian doctrine. But when the report of the traitor's confession is only to be found in a history drawn up by a professed friend of the party accused, it is not an argument upon which much stress can, or ought to be laid, in reasoning with any who are unfriendly to the christian doctrine; and the cause of truth is rather injured than assisted by laying undue stress upon arguments which will not bear examination. The truth is, that Judas did not betray his master for any enmity that he bore him, but from the love of money, expecting he would release himself.

I shall now suggest the proper practical improvement of this interesting and affecting narrative.

1. This history *warns us against covetousness*. The love of money, the apostle saith, is the root of all evil. This was the promi-

ment feature in the character of this faithless apostle, which led him on from one crime to another till it plunged him in remediless perdition. The desire of competence, and even of affluence, is a passion generated in the human mind by observation and experience of the advantages of wealth; and so far as it prompts to industry, and while it limits itself to fair and honourable means of acquiring riches, and is kept in check by a benevolent desire to employ opulence, when acquired, in doing good, this affection is not only innocent but meritorious. But it is a passion which easily gains too great an ascendancy in the human mind, and is more apt than any other to grow as we advance in life, so that it often rises to an exorbitant state, seeking no object but its own gratification, and scrupling no means to accomplish its unworthy purpose: honour, integrity, friendship, generosity, justice, and duty, are sacrificed upon the altar of mammon.

2. We learn the *impossibility of a man's limiting himself to a single vice.* One vice is

so connected with another, that a person who willingly allows himself in the practice of one, will naturally and inevitably fall into another. The faithless disciple was governed by the love of money. This probably first induced him to join the society of Jesus. He saw that he had the elements under his command, and that he could at pleasure supply the largest multitude with the greatest abundance. He expected therefore, that by an early attachment to his party, and that by being admitted to his friendship and councils, he should be advanced to some high post of honour and emolument in his presumed temporal kingdom. In the mean time he was the treasurer of the small society, and he defrauded the poor of the pittance that was due to them. And the sordidness of his mind led him ultimately to treachery, murder, and suicide. This sad example teaches us that we cannot be too much upon our guard against the first beginning of vice.

3. *The best instruction, and the most excel-*

lent example, are sometimes of no avail to restrain men from the commission of the greatest crimes.

If God is just, no man is born wicked. But the human character soon takes its ply, and persons who are very young sometimes acquire such confirmed habits of vice, that no instruction, no admonition, no warning, no reproof, no example, no discipline, will correct the depravity of their hearts. If virtue was ever secure, it must have been in the immediate society of Jesus, listening to his instructions, witnessing his miracles, seeing his bright example, and indulged with his friendly and confidential conversation. Judas had all these, and notwithstanding all, he was a covetous man, a thief, a traitor, a liar, a murderer, and a suicide. Let us remember that no moral advantages are of any use, if we are not solicitous to make a wise improvement of them. When neglected and misapplied they only tend to harden the heart, and to accelerate our ruin. Nor let those be discouraged who are occasionally unsuccessful

in the task of instruction and discipline. There was a case in which the instructions of Jesus himself failed of their effect.

4. We see in the character of Judas the *insupportable anguish of a guilty mind*.

When he saw the unexpected catastrophe of his wicked machinations, his moral feelings were roused, and the consciousness of his meanness, selfishness, injustice, treachery, and impiety, filled him with dismay. The situation into which he had brought his kind and unoffending master, and the prospect of that disgrace and misery which awaited him here and hereafter, overpowered his mind, and drove him to distraction and suicide. There is nothing in the world more truly formidable than the stings of an enlightened conscience. Heavy indeed is the burden of a wounded spirit.

5. There may *be bitter remorse* where there is *no true repentance*. Such was that of this faithless disciple. "When he saw what was done, he repented himself." He felt the horrors of remorse, and could no longer enjoy the wages of his crime. But

his remorse was not genuine contrition. His sorrow was not of that godly sort which works repentance unto salvation. Had it been such, instead of driving him to suicide, it would have led him, like Peter, to tears, to contrition, to humility, to a thorough renovation of heart and life, to renounce all his selfish pursuits, and to devote himself wholly to the cause of truth and virtue, and to the service and honour of that master whom he had injured and betrayed. Let no one vainly imagine that he truly repents of his vices, because his mind is filled with horror at the recollection of them, unless his convictions induce him to fly from the scene of danger and temptation, to renounce his vicious practices, and to form habits of wisdom and virtue.

6. Suicide, where it is *deliberately perpetrated*, is a *great moral offence*, and argues *extreme erroneousness of judgment, or depravity of mind*.

The love of life is a principle so early formed, and so deeply rooted in human nature, that few are tempted to voluntary

suicide, who are not previously deprived of the use of reason, and in these melancholy cases it is the disease which is responsible, and not the man.

Of the guilt of deliberate suicide various judgments have been formed. Some have even exalted it into a virtue ; others have defended it as innocent ; and many have loaded it with greater criminality than properly belongs to it.

It has been urged, that when life becomes a burden of insupportable weight, there can be no harm in relieving ourselves from its pressure. But whatever conviction an argument of this kind may carry to the mind of a heathen philosopher, or of a modern unbeliever, it cannot produce the smallest effect upon the views and feelings of a Christian, who looks up to God as the supreme disposer of events, who regards affliction as a needful and salutary discipline, and who hopes for a reward proportioned to his antecedent and probationary sufferings ; who therefore regards it as an indispensable duty, like a well-disciplined centinel, to re-

main at his post till he obtains a regular dismissal from his sovereign chief. The few suicides, who are mentioned in sacred writ, are not examples for a Christian's imitation. It is evident, on the contrary, that Jesus and his apostles, though oppressed with sorrow and anguish beyond measure and beyond their strength, though the most miserable of men, if in this world only they had hope, never thought of relieving themselves by a voluntary death. And though some persons, in a mistaken zeal for the honour of Christ, have represented him as dismissing his spirit before the natural period of dissolution upon the cross, which would in fact be a commission of suicide, it is well known to all, who are competent to judge, that the evangelist's expression gives no countenance to such an interpretation, and signifies nothing more than that he expired like other sufferers. Virtue is, indeed, never more illustrious, or more eminently beneficial, than when she is exhibited as bearing sufferings with unbroken fortitude, with dutiful resignation, and with cheerful hope.

7. *Mark the wickedness of hypocrisy, as exemplified in the character of the Jewish priests and elders.*

These men had, without scruple, suborned treachery, perjury, and murder; but they were too conscientious, truly, to put the price of blood into the sacred treasury: and when the traitor, in the horrors of distraction, and desirous to remedy the mischief he had done, proclaimed, in the agony of his heart, that he had betrayed innocent blood, these pious priests and rulers reply, "What is that to us, see thou to that." No characters are more truly contemptible, none are more diabolically wicked, than those who make religion the pretext for rancour and revenge. And oppression and cruelty are never more odious than when they are exercised under the pretence of zeal for religion, and by those who are, by profession, not only the protectors of innocence, but the ministers of peace and virtue.

8. *Societies are not to be charged with the errors and the crimes of individual members.*

One dishonest man, one traitor, thief, and

murderer, was found in the society of the apostles, and among the companions and disciples of Jesus. But how erroneous a judgment would they have formed, who would have estimated the character of all by that of Judas. Let us learn to distinguish between societies, and the individuals of which they are composed. Bodies of men may sometimes be, upon the whole, virtuous and just, and the ends which they pursue may be wise and beneficent, while individuals belonging to these bodies may be rash, turbulent, dishonest, and profligate. And, on the other hand, in the worst societies there may be individuals who may deserve a better connexion. Let us then discriminate in our judgment of characters, and neither praise nor condemn promiscuously and without distinction.

9. Let us adore the depths of the divine counsels, in making use even of the vices and the crimes of men to accomplish the benevolent purposes of the divine government. It was necessary, for various reasons, that the death of Jesus should be public,

and particularly that he should be put to death by his enemies, that there might be no pretence of fraud or collusion in his resurrection. And in order to this, it was expedient that a traitor should be found in the family of Christ, who should deliver up his master to those who sought his life. It was by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, that Jesus was delivered up, and by wicked hands was crucified and slain.

Thus it is, that moral, as well as natural evil, is constrained to accomplish the wise and benevolent purposes of divine Providence, and when it has performed its office, it shall be finally exterminated, and shall no longer find a place in the works of God. "Whatsoever God does, it shall be for ever, nothing can be put to it, and nothing can be taken from it, and God does it that men should fear before him." Eccles. iii. 14.

SERMON XII.

REFLECTIONS ON THE CHARACTER AND THE DESTINY OF ESAU.

HEB. xii. 16, 17.

Lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

THE design of the writer of this epistle is to preserve the Hebrew Christians from apostacy, and to this end, in the context, he recommends to those believers who were most enlightened and confirmed in the faith, to keep a watchful eye upon two sorts of persons, whose example would otherwise have a most pernicious influence upon the society. The first were those, who in consequence of persecution, combined with strong Jewish prejudices, were

disgusted with the christian religion, and were desirous of seducing others from the christian faith. These are the persons to whom the writer refers, when he exhorts them to look diligently, lest any man, failing of the grace of God, that is, becoming an apostate from the christian religion, in other words, lest any root of bitterness springing up, should cause trouble, and thereby many be defiled; that is, lest a disgust against the christian doctrine growing up secretly in the church, like some noxious weed, should spread its bane around and destroy the precious plants which were within the reach of its pernicious influence. Such roots of bitterness were without hesitation to be plucked up and cast away. They who were disgusted with the christian religion, and who were endeavouring to spread that disgust among others, were to be disowned by, and to be dismissed from the communion of believers.

The second class of persons over whom the writer directs sound and established Christians to keep a vigilant eye, are those

who undervalue their christian privileges, and who were ready to sacrifice their principles, either to the gratification of their passions, or to the advancement of their secular interest. These he calls fornicators, or profane persons, like Esau, who for one morsel of meat, that is, for one repast, sold his birthright. "For ye know," continues he, "how, that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance," that is, he could not prevail on his father to change his mind, "though he sought it carefully with tears." The writer intimates that such persons as these, who acted against their better judgment, who sacrificed their privilege and birthright as Christians, to their passions and self-interest, ought likewise to be excluded from christian communion, that their example might not infect others. Nor should they hastily be admitted again, even though they professed to repent of their folly, and earnestly desired to be received once more into christian fellowship.

I propose briefly to represent the character and the conduct of Esau—his crime and punishment—the unavailableness of his regret to procure the remission of his sentence—and shall conclude with some reflections.

Esau was the twin brother of Jacob, and the elder of the two. He was a man rough in appearance and in manners, but open and unsuspicious in his temper; a man of courage, who delighted in the sports of the field, and the favourite of his father, because he hunted for him and partook of his good cheer. Jacob was more of a domestic character, retired, artful, and over-reaching: he was the favourite of his mother.

Esau, being the eldest, regarded himself as entitled to the right of primogeniture, and a blessing having been entailed upon the posterity of Abraham and Isaac, he of course expected that his own posterity would be put into possession, if not of the whole, at least of the principal share of the promised blessing, whatever that might be. And most probably he did not know that God, before his birth, had expressly ordained

the contrary, and had fixed upon the younger brother as the heir of the promise.

Esau, in the text, is called a fornicator. In his history he is nowhere charged with this vice, and the word is used in a very lax sense in the scriptures. This epithet is applied to Esau, probably,

1. Because he married a heathen and an idolater, and did not connect himself with his own family, which was the earnest wish of his parents; and the disappointment of this expectation is repeatedly mentioned as a source of bitter regret. But,

2. He was himself, probably, seduced into the practice of idolatry, by means of his heathenish and idolatrous connexion. Idolatry is often called fornication in the scriptures, especially of the Old Testament; and that not merely because the rites of heathenism encouraged, and sometimes required the most licentious practices, but because the connexion between God and his chosen people, being represented under the emblem of the marriage covenant, ido-

latry was the violation of that engagement. And this, I think, serves to explain the true meaning of the Jerusalem decree. The apostles require, Acts, xv. 20, that the converts from heathenism to Christianity should abstain from pollution of idols, from fornication, from things strangled, and from blood. Pollution from idols may perhaps mean direct idol worship; fornication, in this connexion, may denote any other act which was expressive of regard for the idol, such, for instance, as eating of things which had been offered to idols in an idol temple. Esau, therefore, having been seduced to heathenish and idolatrous practices, is called a fornicator, one who violated the covenant under which he and his ancestors were engaged to worship the one living and true God, and to worship him alone.

He is also called a profane person, that is, a person who was unworthy to be admitted into the society of the worshippers of the true God. The reason assigned for this character of him is, that for a single repast

he sold his birthright. The account of this transaction is briefly related, Gen. xxv. 33. Esau came one day faint from the field, as Jacob was boiling some pottage, of which Esau requested to partake. Jacob, taking an ungenerous advantage of his brother's eagerness, demanded that he should first swear to him that he would sell him his birthright; to which he, apprehending himself at the point of death, unwarily consented, and thus, as the historian remarks, he undervalued his birthright.

What this birthright was, is not certainly known. The unjust distinction of modern times, and of the feudal system, by which the elder son is entitled to a disproportionate share of the paternal estate, was not then in existence. Nor had the patriarchs, who lived in tents, and whose possessions consisted chiefly in the number of their cattle, any large estates to bequeath. Some have thought that the priesthood was entailed upon the eldest son, and that Esau is condemned for slighting this honourable office. The most probable account seems

to be that which I have already hinted at. The birthright which Esau despised was the entail of the promise. He must have known that it had been promised to Abraham, that in his seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. He must have known that this promise had been entailed upon Isaac in preference to Ishmael—and ignorant, as he probably was, that this entail had been cut off, in his instance, before his birth, and the descent of the promise settled upon the posterity of Jacob, by the express declaration of God to Rebecca, he must have believed that the promised blessing would have descended to him and to his posterity. This is the entail which, in the moment of eagerness and despondency, he undervalued and sold. He thought he must have died if his brother had not imparted to him a share of that refreshment: his birthright therefore he regarded as useless, and he parted with it irrevocably to save his life.

Herein he acted incautiously and unguardedly. He ought to have rested on

the divine promise, and to have trusted his life to the care of Providence. If he had reflected for a moment, he could not have supposed that his brother, mean and over-reaching as he was, would have suffered him to die upon the spot sooner than afford him a little relief. But he was thoughtless, precipitate, and imperious. Hurried on by present feeling, without allowing himself time for consideration, he fell into the snare of his selfish and artful brother. Hence it is that Esau is called profane. By his folly and precipitation he excluded himself from the society of the chosen people of God; from the blessings, privileges, and promises of the Abrahàmic covenant. And his example is held up by the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews, as a warning to Christians not to think lightly of their privileges, and not hastily to forego the promises and hopes of the christian profession, for the sake of worldly gratification, or of secular advantage.

Esau had not yet come to the end of his troubles. The writer reminds the Hebrews,

that afterwards, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears. It may very easily be supposed that Esau, when he came to reflect upon his conduct, would soon and bitterly repent of the rash step which he had taken, by which he had cut off the entail of the promise from himself and from his family, and that he would be anxious, if possible, to recover his birth-right. Isaac was grown old and feeble, his sight was decayed, and he apprehended that the time of his death was at hand. He called his favourite son, therefore, to his chamber, and ordered him to take some venison and dress it in a manner which was gratifying to his taste, that after he had enjoyed his meat he might pronounce on him a special blessing. Rebecca heard the direction, and while Esau was gone into the field to obey his father's order, she dressed some food in the manner which she knew was palatable to her husband, and disguising the younger son Jacob, she sent him

with it to his father, and he thereby surreptitiously obtained the blessing intended for his elder brother. "Lo!" said his aged and deceived parent, "the fragrance of my son's garment is the fragrance of a full grown field, which the Lord hath blessed! So may God give thee of the dew of the heavens and of the fatness of the earth, abundance of corn, and of wine, and of oil! To thee may peoples be subject, to thee may nations bend! Be thou lord over thine own brethren, and let the sons of thine own mother to thee bow down! If any one curses thee, may he be cursed, and whosoever blesses thee, may he be blessed!"*

Soon after the impostor had gone out, his brother, the true Esau, entered. What passed upon that occasion between his father and himself is related with so much simplicity and pathos by the historian, that I shall repeat it in his own words, and nearly in the version of the late learned Dr. Geddes, ver. 32—40. Isaac had but just made an end of blessing Jacob, and Jacob

* Gen. xxvii. 27. Dr. Geddes's translation.

was hardly gone out from the presence of his father Isaac, when his brother Esau came in from his hunting. And he said to his father, "Let my father rise and eat of his son's venison, to the end that thy soul may bless me." "But who art thou?" replied his father Isaac. "I am," said he, "thy son, thy first-born Esau." "Who then, and where is he," said Isaac, in the greatest consternation, "that already procured and brought me venison, of all which I have eat before thy coming? for him have I blessed, and he shall be blessed."

"When Esau heard these words of his father, he uttered a most loud and bitter cry, and said to his father, Bless me, even me also, O my father." Isaac answered, "Thy brother came deceitfully and got thy blessing." "Justly," said Esau, "was his name called Jacob (*supplanter*), for twice has he supplanted me. Formerly he got my birth-right, and, lo! now he has gotten my blessing. But still," said he, "hast thou not reserved a blessing for me?" Isaac answered and said to Esau, "Lo! him have

I constituted thy lord, and to him all his brethren I have made subordinate. Corn, and wine, and oil I have given for his support: and now, my son, what can I do for thee?" Again Esau said to his father, "Hast thou only that one blessing to give, my father? Bless me, even me also, O my father."

Here Esau wept aloud; when his father Isaac, penetrated with sorrow, answered and said unto him, "Lo! remote from the fatness of the earth and the dew of the heavens from above must thy residence be. On thy desert thou shalt live, and to thy brother thou shalt be subordinate; but the time will come, when thou shalt prevail and break his yoke from off thy neck." As though he had said, "The fertile land of Canaan is allotted to Jacob, thou must be content with mount Seir, bleak and barren as it is; and the only consolation I can give thee is, that in some future period thou, or thy posterity, shalt assert thine independence and shake off thy brother's yoke."

Thus it is that Esau, when he would have

inherited the blessing was rejected, and could by no means whatever prevail upon his father to change his mind and to revoke the blessing, which had been so fraudulently obtained, though he sought it earnestly, even with tears.

Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. Esau is called a fornicator because he married the daughter of an idolater, and was probably seduced by her into idolatrous practices. He is also said to be profane, because, believing himself at the point of death, he sold his birthright, that is, his title as the first born to the inheritance of the promise which God had made to Abraham and Isaac, for a mess of pottage.

He would afterwards have inherited the blessing; and to this end he went out to hunt at the desire of his father Isaac, to prepare venison for him, and to obtain his father's blessing. But before he could accomplish his purpose, Jacob, at the instigation of Rebecca, disguised himself,

brought in the venison, and surreptitiously secured it. When Esau returned, and the fraud was discovered, Esau importuned Isaac, if not to retract his blessing of Jacob, at least to confer a blessing upon him. This Isaac refused; though Esau, with tears, and earnest entreaties, besought him to change his mind, and to restore that blessing to him which his brother had so fraudulently obtained. But he wept and implored in vain. And his example is held up by the writer to the Hebrews, as a warning to those who are tempted to make light of their christian privileges, and to neglect the day of their visitation.

Having stated these facts, I now proceed to make some remarks upon this history.

1. Observe the *fidelity* of the sacred historian.

The faults of distinguished persons are related by him with the same simplicity as their virtues. Isaac and Jacob are heroes of the story, yet their failings are not concealed. The fond and foolish partia-

lity of Isaac and Rebecca to their favorite sons, the selfish, ungenerous, over-reaching spirit of Jacob, his fraud and lies, are related with the same simplicity and impartial attention to truth as the faith of Abraham, the wisdom of Solomon, and the resignation of Eli. There is no history that is written with a fairness and impartiality comparable to that of the Israelite nation and the Abrahamic family. Here men are represented as they exist in real life, with all their virtues and with all their crimes. The judgment of the historians may be sometimes erroneous, and they may sometimes commend when they ought severely to censure; but their veracity and impartiality stand unimpeached. The history therefore speaks for itself, and carries its own credentials with it, beyond any other that ever was written.

2. The fault of Esau by no means *extenuates the crimes* of Jacob and Rebecca.

Esau disobeyed his parents, and heaped affliction upon their grey hairs, by marrying into the family of a heathen and an

idolater. He departed from the covenant of his God, probably by joining in idolatrous rites, and by indulging himself in their licentious practices. It was hardly possible for him to enter into so close an alliance with bad and profligate persons, without being seduced, in some degree, into their follies and their crimes. He was headstrong and impetuous. Imagining, or pretending, that he was ready to expire with hunger and fatigue, he, "in evil hour," parted with his birthright, and renounced his interest in the promises for the sake of a single repast. Hence he is justly called profane, and held up as a warning to those who are in danger of resigning their christian privileges and hopes for secular and unworthy considerations.

But all this is no excuse for the conduct of his unkind mother, and his base, ungenerous brother. Esau's conduct was bad, but that of Jacob was far worse. Nothing could betray a more selfish and contemptible spirit than Jacob's mean extortion of the privileges of the birthright from a bro-

ther, whom he saw ready to perish with hunger. And as to the conduct of himself and his mother in imposing upon the ignorant and fond credulity of Isaac, it is a continued tissue of wilful and deliberate fraud and falsehood, and betrays, in both the parties concerned, a rooted depravity of heart. It is to be hoped, that both of them, upon reflection, repented of their misdeeds, for they had much greater need to shed tears of penitence and contrition upon the occasion, than the poor youth whom they had combined to defraud.

3. Through the whole of this iniquitous scene the *divine character is clear* and without a cloud.

Nothing could be more inconsistent with the wisdom and dignity of the divine administration, than that the blessings of the covenant should have been made to depend upon the circumstances related in the history of Esau. Nothing could be more ridiculous and absurd than to expect, that the entail of a promise, in which the whole world was materially interested, should

depend on the fond partiality of a doting old man, the artful contrivance of an intriguing woman, or the extortion, fraud, and falsehood of a selfish and dishonest boy. Had the circumstances of the narration led to this conclusion, the history would indeed have been of very doubtful credit. But the contrary is most apparent.

For wise reasons God had ordained the different destiny of the twin descendants of Isaac and Rebecca, previous to their birth, and had actually foretold to the inquiring mother that the elder should serve the younger. This determination was made previous to any voluntary act upon the part of the children, and therefore quite independent on their moral character, upon any merit or demerit of their own. Such is the observation of the Apostle, Rom. ix. 11. "The children being not yet born, neither having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God, according to election, might stand, not of works, but of him that calleth, it was said unto her, the elder shall serve the younger,

as it is written, Mal. i. 2, "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated;" that is, in the figurative language of prophecy, I have chosen Jacob and his posterity to the possession of privileges, which will be denied to Esau and his posterity.

Why this choice was actually made we are not informed, and it is vain to conjecture. It is certain, that no injustice was done to the elder brother; for God has an undoubted right to dispose of his gifts as he pleases, and no creature has any claim upon him for more than he chuses to bestow. But as God is wise as well as good, and does nothing without a sufficient motive, it is certain, that he had some good reason for making this preference, though we are not acquainted with it, and cannot discover it. At any rate, it is perfectly analogous to the general dispensations of divine Providence, by which, without any apparent reason, important blessings, both natural and moral, are conferred upon one nation, family, or individual, which are denied to another; and it should

seem, intellectual and moral advantages are sometimes communicated to those, who, it is known, will not improve them; while they are withheld from others who would have made a right use of them. So that human sagacity, baffled in its researches into the abyss of Providence, is constrained to adore what it cannot comprehend, and at the conclusion of its most laborious investigation, it must join issue with the Apostle, "Oh the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" Rom. xi. 33.

4. The Scriptures of the Old Testament should be read by all, and especially by young persons, with *great discrimination and caution*.

There are many persons who believe, but without sufficient reason, that the whole of the Old Testament Scriptures are inspired, and that all the persons who make a conspicuous figure in the Jewish history, especially if they were upon any occasion the medium of divine communi-

cations to mankind, were eminent, and even perfect examples of virtue. One is called "the Father of the faithful;" another is, "the man after God's own heart;" *this* is the wisest of men; *that* is the meekest; and *another* is the most patient of mankind; and in this way unreflecting persons are induced to believe, that every thing which such persons are reported to have said or done, is right, and worthy of imitation. Whereas, in fact, no conclusion can be more remote from truth; and there is scarcely a character in the Old Testament, however respectable, and even venerable in many respects, that is not debased by some glaring defect in virtue, if not contaminated by some notorious crime. Jacob, when young, was guilty of fraud and falsehood; Solomon was an idolater and dissolute; and David was an adulterer and a murderer.

Young persons, in reading the Scriptures of the Old Testament, should be apprised that this fidelity and impartiality in the narrative adds much to the credibility

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of the Old Testament, though it detracts greatly from the perfection of the character of the reputed saint. Let them therefore read the history with caution, with judgment, and with discrimination. Let them regard it as in the main true and credible, and as containing many authentic accounts of divine communications. But do not let them suppose that the character of a prophet is universally impeccable, much less let them regard the eminent characters in the Jewish scriptures as models for their imitation. It requires a considerable exercise of charity, and great allowance to be made for the defect of the dispensation under which they lived, for the force of prejudice, and for the influence of example, to believe, that some, whose characters are highly extolled, were really good men; and it should be remembered, that their excellences are often more political than personal. David was "a man after God's own heart," not because of his private character, which was very problematical, but because he exterminated ido-

latry. And the wisdom of Solomon was wholly philosophical and political. Personally his conduct was the extreme of folly.

How widely different the character of the very best of those whose history is recorded in the Old Testament from that of Jesus, as exhibited in the gospel. Here indeed we see the true model of perfection; an example in every particular worthy of imitation. And how came the evangelists to describe such a character as this? Was it their own invention?—Their uncultivated minds were utterly incapable of forming so sublime a picture. But they had the great original before their eyes. They relate what they saw, and what they heard, and what they felt, and therefore their testimony must be true, and the gospel doctrine must be worthy of all acceptance.

5. Regret is often unavailing to *restore an offender* to the privileges of innocence.

Esau sold his birthright, and he soon discovered his error, and when he would have retracted the bargain, it was out of

his power. The blessing once gone was gone for ever: and tears, and prayers, and exclamations, were in vain employed to recover it. Let us then learn caution in the concerns of life, and never engage in any undertaking of importance without due deliberation. A false step once taken, how soon soever it may be discovered, how earnest soever the desire and the labour to retract it, may be irrecoverable, and the consequence of it may embitter the whole of life.

This caution applies with double force to the commission of crime and the contraction of guilt. Regret, however bitter, repentance, however sincere, can never replace the offender on the high ground of innocence on which he before stood. Miserable self-deceivers are they who yield to temptation, and fall into sin, in the fond expectation of recovering themselves by early repentance. They will soon learn their fatal error. They will find that repentance is no easy task, nor always either in their will or in their power. Much less

will the deepest repentance avail to remove the bitter consequences of deliberate guilt. In vain will they look for their former peace of mind, conscious innocence, and pleasing hope. They may seek for it with tears, but they will seek in vain. "Let him then, who thinketh he standeth, take heed lest he fall."



SERMON XIII.

REFLECTIONS UPON THE VICISSITUDES OF THE SEASONS.

OCCASIONED BY THE EXTRAORDINARY PREVALENCE OF FROST AND
FOG IN THE COMMENCEMENT OF A. D. 1814.

GEN. viii. 22.

*While the earth remaineth, seed-time and harvest, and
cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and
night, shall not cease.*

THE extraordinary weather with which not only this metropolis and its vicinity, but the whole country, has been visited for some time past, cannot but suggest some useful reflections to a serious and attentive mind.

A fog of vast extent, of unusual density, and uncommon duration, has been succeeded by a season of frost and snow, still more uncommon and universal; which has interposed a temporary obstruction to the

usual communication with distant parts of the country, to inland navigation, to the pursuits of agriculture, to trade, manufactures, and commerce, to a degree and extent unprecedented in the memory of any one now living.

In the metropolis it is attended with extreme inconvenience and much danger; and it excites no inconsiderable degree of alarm. It has occasioned many distressing accidents, it has caused many severe falls, painful bruises, dislocated limbs, and broken bones. It has rendered the supply of water, that article of prime necessity, inconvenient and precarious. It has obstructed the regular supply of the market: it excites apprehension from the increased danger which would accrue in case of fire, from which hitherto the metropolis has been in a considerable degree mercifully preserved; and much apprehension exists with respect to the consequences of a sudden thaw, if that should happen to take place. In the mean time, the price of fuel is enormous, and rapidly advancing. And the

severity of the season is very prejudicial to the health of those who are exposed to its inclemency, and particularly to persons of feeble and delicate habits, or who are advanced in life, and suffering under the infirmities of age. And finally, while the rigour of the season is felt by persons of every condition in life, it presses with peculiar weight upon the poor, many of whom are thrown out of employment, whose wants and distresses are increased and increasing to an incalculable degree.

1. This extraordinary state of the season leads us to reflect upon the wisdom and goodness of God in the *original constitution of nature*, and in the *general steadiness of its course*.

The course of nature is the succession of phenomena in the external world. These are the result of the laws of nature, which are the wise appointment, and, as some of the greatest and best philosophers have believed, the immediate energy of the divine Being.

The course of nature consists in the re-

gular vicissitude of day and night ; in the constant succession of seed-time and harvest, of summer and winter, of cold and heat ; the revolutions of which in the same climate, though not with minute exactness, are, to all practical purposes, nearly the same.

In the SPRING of the year, within these mild and temperate latitudes, *the weather begins to soften, vegetation buds*, the soil becomes fit for cultivation and for receiving the seeds and roots of various useful and esculent vegetables, and particularly of various kinds of grain, which is the main support of human life.—In the SUMMER the days grow long, warmth increases, refreshing showers descend to water and fructify the earth, and the course of nature tends to accelerate the progress of vegetation in the gardens and in the fields. While the length and brightness of the day exhilarates the spirits of the labourer, supplies him with vigour, and affords him opportunity to go through that additional toil which

the increased occupations of the garden and the field impose upon him.

In the AUTUMN the harvest ripens, the weather becomes settled, and suitable for gathering in the corn, and for collecting those precious fruits and productions of the fertile, well-cultivated, and grateful earth, which constitute the rich, the needful, and the beautifully diversified provision for man and beast for the ensuing year. It is commonly a season of universal gladness: and that man must be a total stranger to the most refined emotions, the most exalted sensibilities of the soul, who is insensible to the joy of harvest, and whose heart is not touched with gratitude to the bounteous Giver of the universal feast.

In the WINTER, when the days are short, the nights long and dark, and the season cold and inclement, vegetation is quiescent. The external labours of agriculture and horticulture are almost suspended. The ground is made impenetrable by the frost. The waters are congealed; and the surface

of the earth is often covered with snow. Yet this state of things is far from being without its use. The vesture of snow protects the roots of vegetables from being chilled by frost, and the congelation of the surface of the ground enables the tiller of the glebe to carry out and to spread the manure which is necessary to fertilize the soil, and to qualify it for nourishing the seed, and causing it to germinate and spring for the future harvest.

Such is the general revolution of the seasons; and though nothing can be more uncertain than the weather, and it never happens that two years in succession are exactly alike, yet the similarity is so great, and the range of vicissitude is so contracted, that the earth seldom fails, sometimes a week or two earlier, and sometimes later, to yield the expected produce; now indeed more abundantly in one form, and now in another, yet, upon the whole, sufficient to supply sustenance both for man and beast.

All this is the work of God; the benign result of his governing providence. He is

Sovereign and Lord of nature. It was He who fixed the laws of the universe. It is He that carries them into effect. *It is He that bringeth forth Mazzaroth in his season ; that guideth Arcturus, with his sons ; that directeth the sweet influences of the Pleiades, and looseth the bands of Orion. He appointeth the moon for seasons, and the sun knoweth the time of his rising and his going down.* It was the wisdom of God which so arranged the magnitudes, the distances, the situation and revolutions of the heavenly bodies, as to produce those effects which he saw would be most beneficial to the animal and rational inhabitants of the worlds he formed. It is true that the course of nature is regulated by certain invariable laws, and that not a drop of rain, nor a flake of snow falls but in its proper time and place. And these laws are the result of infinite wisdom and benevolence, ordering every thing for good. To deny this, would be to contradict the plainest dictates of the understanding. To argue from the regularity of the phenomena of nature, that they have no

intelligent cause, would be to infer the want of intelligence from a fact which is itself the most satisfactory proof of consummate intelligence, than which nothing could be more absurd.

The wisdom and goodness of the Creator in establishing the regular vicissitude of the seasons may be further illustrated by the following considerations. If this regularity did not generally prevail, if it were uncertain whether the approaching month would bring with it the frosts and snows of winter, or the scorching heats of summer, human prudence would be of no avail, wisdom would not be acquired by experience. It would be impossible to make provision for future contingencies. The majority of the human race must perish for want of the necessaries of life. And the survivors must live in misery, like untutored savages, or the wild beasts of the forest. But now, as the course of nature is steady and uniform, as the returning seasons bring their own conveniences and inconveniences with them, which the sagacity of man foresees,

his prudence provides accordingly, and man grows wiser by experience. In due time he secures a shady retreat from the scorching beams of the summer's sun, and a comfortable habitation to shelter him from the frosts and snows of winter. By experience he learns to cultivate the soil, and to improve the fertility of the earth, so as not only to supply his daily wants, but to lay up a store of provision for the season when the face of the earth presents only the appearance of a desolate waste. And the experience of one generation is thus transmitted for the benefit of another: which, successively improving upon the practice of their forefathers, the state of mankind in civilized countries, where property is protected and the arts encouraged, is in a continual progress of amelioration from generation to generation, to an indefinite degree.

It is likewise an instance of the great wisdom and goodness of divine Providence, that the seasons, though upon the whole regular, are nevertheless to a consi-

derable degree diversified. Sometimes the changes in the weather are so exactly suited to the produce of the soil that every thing prospers, and crops of all kinds are most abundant, most excellent, and well gathered in. At other times the seasons are unkindly. At one time a long continued drought and scorching heat burn up the produce of the soil, and in the midst of summer deface the country with the dreary aspect of winter. At another time incessant rains, or unseasonable frosts, chill the ground, and nip vegetation in the bud; or blights and tempests occasionally destroy it, just when it has become fit for the sickle or the scythe, and disappoint the hope of the husbandman, at the moment when the object of his wishes and labours appears to be within his grasp. Nevertheless, these varieties, how considerable or frequent soever, take place within certain limits, and though they often do great mischief, and disappoint the expectations of the agriculturist, they are neither so frequent nor so extreme as to baffle calcula-

tion, and to invalidate experience. On the contrary, they excite the ingenuity and industry of man to provide against contingencies of this nature, either by varying his crops, so that the weather, which is destructive to one may be salutary to another, or by providing other contrivances to counterbalance, or at least to qualify the existing inconvenience. So that upon the whole the intemperature of the seasons is never so great as entirely to baffle the expectations of the husbandman. He ploughs in hope, and sows in hope, and, by the blessing of divine Providence, he usually becomes partaker of his hope.

And to say the truth, how much better is the state of man in consequence of this beautiful variety of the course of nature, which, though it is sufficiently regular to encourage hope, is also sufficiently diversified to alarm apprehension, to whet his faculties, and to rouse him to industry and activity ! How much wiser and happier is he, how much more exalted in the sphere of intellectual and of moral excellence,

than if the earth had produced spontaneously every thing which is necessary to the comfort and convenience of life, so that the indolent inhabitant would have had nothing more to do than to put forth his hand and take what was ready prepared for his use ! How much sweeter is the food that is earned by labour, how much more gratifying the comforts which are the produce of ingenuity and industry, than those which are inherited without any pains or forethought, even though these should be far more considerable ! In truth, the only man who is completely miserable is he who has nothing to do, and upon whom time hangs as an insupportable burden. And how mild, how beneficent the sentence pronounced upon fallen man, " In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread ! "

II. How much is the wisdom and goodness of divine Providence illustrated in *adapting the constitution and the inclinations of mankind* to the conveniences and inconveniences of their local habitations, and in reconciling them to their lot.

In different latitudes the nature of the climate is widely different. Those regions which lie near the equator are scorched with insufferable and unremitting heat, or annoyed with deluges of rain and tremendous hurricanes. While those which approximate to the pole are bound up with perpetual frost, and are exposed to a long and cheerless night of weeks', and even months' duration, without a glimpse of the solar ray. The sea is covered with islands of ice, and the surface of the land, for the greater part of the year, with snow, which during a few weeks in the summer gives way to a scanty produce, in which few or none of the vegetables which are adapted to the sustenance of human life can be brought to maturity.

An inhabitant of the temperate zone, if suddenly transported to either of these extreme regions, and there left to himself, must inevitably perish. His constitution would not be able to endure the extreme either of heat or cold to which it would be exposed. And being ignorant of the course

of nature in a climate to which he had not been accustomed, he would be utterly unable to provide either the sustenance, or the clothing, or the habitation which the change of climate would render necessary ; nor would he have any means of guarding against the insalubrity of the air, or the noxious and venomous animals which might be natives of the soil. Of the truth of this supposition we have ample proof in the great mortality which uniformly attends the settlement of colonies in newly discovered countries. And, if we may give credit to history, whole armies have, in consequence of ignorance and inexperience, been at once suffocated by parching winds, or swallowed up in the sands of a burning desert.

But the most remarkable fact, the most memorable event which history records of the dreadful effect of a rigorous climate upon those who are exposed to it, and unprepared for it ; an example which will be recollected with horror as long as the page of history shall remain ; is one that has happened in our own time, and which involved

in it the fates of the whole civilized world : I mean, the destruction of an army the most numerous, the best appointed, the best disciplined, and the most formidable, which, perhaps, was ever assembled in any place, or upon any occasion, and the melancholy catastrophe of which, through the unknown and unexpected inclemency of the climate, was so complete, that with the exception of a few of the principal officers, and a small portion of troops, hardly any escaped alive, and unhurt, to relate the disastrous tale.*

Yet, such is the admirable contrivance of divine wisdom and benevolence in the structure of human nature, that the natives of these torrid, or frozen climates, which are so uncomfortable and so formidable to strangers, are not only reconciled to a residence in them, but even greatly prefer them to all others, and imagine themselves to be the most favoured of nations. Their constitutions are so formed, or by their habits of living they are so trained and dis-

* See Lebaume's Account of Bonaparte's Retreat from Moscow.

ciplined, as to endure without inconvenience the respective extremes of heat or cold. They possess the health and vigour which their situations require, and some of them live to extreme old age. Being experienced in the vicissitudes of their respective climates, they know how to provide both food, and clothing, and habitations, adapted to the exigencies of their situation: and enjoying what are, in their estimation, the comforts and luxuries of life, they rather pity than envy the polished European, and covet not, either the conveniences of his abode, the variety and ornaments of his dress, or the delicacies of his table.

When we look abroad into the country in this inclement season, we are shocked to see the fields covered with snow, and the roads, the rivers, and canals, so blocked up as greatly to impede, if not absolutely to suspend, the intercourse of society, the labours of agriculture, the action of machinery, and the operations of commerce; we regard the duration of it as a signal calamity, such as hath not occurred within

the recollection of any one now living. And this naturally excites our compassion for the wretched inhabitants of the frozen zone, who at this season of the year are excluded from the light of the sun, who bury themselves in holes and caves, like wild beasts, whose mutual intercourse is suspended for weeks and months, who reside in the midst of perpetual snows, whose miserable soil produces not a single article of sustenance, who have no means of subsistence but what they derive from their skill in fishing, and who have no wood for fuel, or materials for building, but what the ocean drives upon their coast. It is impossible to conceive of human nature as existing in what appears to us a more comfortless state, and in such a state, existence scarcely appears to be desirable. Yet such is the wisdom and benignity of divine Providence, in adapting the constitution and the pliancy of human nature to its existing circumstances, that these poor and miserable beings, as we are apt to think and to call them, are perfectly satisfied with their lot,

and neither covet nor envy the conveniences and comforts of the civilized and opulent European. If they are successful in their fisheries, and escape from accident, they are as happy as they can conceive, and they ask for no amelioration of their condition. The experiment has been tried more than once, and it has been uniformly found, that when any of these innocent savages have been brought to Europe, and supplied with the necessaries and comforts of civilized life, they have constantly pined after the frosts and snows of their native home, and have embraced with eagerness the earliest opportunity of returning to the land of their forefathers, and to the society, the occupations, and the habits of life to which they had been trained from infancy.

Such is the impartial goodness of the Universal Parent, in providing for his human offspring. According to the present system of nature, it was impossible that all should enjoy the same beauty and salubrity of climate : but He has abundantly compensated the defect, by giving that pliancy to the

human frame which shall adapt itself to every climate, and make every one believe that his own allotment is the best. O that men would praise the Lord for his goodness, and for his wonderful works to the children of men !

III. How *wide the extent*, and yet *how limited the boundaries* of human knowledge !

When we consider that the intellect of man is equal to the discovery of the situation, the distance, and the magnitude of the various spheres which compose the solar system, and of estimating their courses with mathematical precision ; that he is capable of calculating to an instant, the various eclipses of the sun and moon, and of the satellites of the planets, not only those which have lately happened, or will soon occur, but of those which took place ten thousand years ago, or which will happen for ten thousand years to come, supposing the continued existence of the planets and their secondaries —when we call to mind that astronomy has discovered the existence of stars, the light of

which has been thousands of years in travelling to the earth—and that it even essays to form some faint idea of the structure of the magnificent and stupendous universe, one is ready to conclude that nothing which is the object of knowledge can be incomprehensible to a being possessed of such a mighty grasp of intellect. And yet we need not go far, before we find a subject, and that a very common one, which brings the greatest philosopher to a stand, and which baffles his utmost penetration, and that is, the changes of the weather. No one can foretel to-day, with precision, what the weather will be to-morrow : much less for a week, or a month, or a year to come. And weak and ignorant indeed must that individual be, who can place any confidence in meteorological predictions. Such is the large extent in one direction, and the narrow limitation in another, of the human intellect, and such the impressive lesson which true philosophy reads to human vanity. It is indeed, impossible that a true philosopher should be vain. Not, indeed, but that

the course of the winds and vapours is regulated by laws as fixed and invariable as those by which the planets move in their orbits; and if our faculties were equal to the discovery, we should see that every gust of wind, and every drop of rain, are subject to calculations as rigid as the return of an eclipse. But the cases are too minute, or too remote, for the cognizance of the senses, and we can no more account for them, in common cases, than if they happened by chance.

And this circumstance has induced some persons, whose piety was greater than their judgment, to conclude, because these changes baffle all human calculation, that the courses of the winds are not subject to general laws, but that the Regent of the Universe has reserved the direction of the winds to his own immediate and arbitrary control: so that not a gust of wind, nor a breath of air, stirs without a miracle. But in this supposition there is more of piety than of philosophy and good sense. The currents of the atmosphere are not of more

importance than those of the ocean, yet every one believes the latter to be the result of general laws, and why not the former? All things are of God, and we cannot be too much impressed with the idea, that every thing which happens is the result of divine appointment, and even the operation of divine agency. But we are not to measure infinite wisdom by the narrow intellect of man. The wisest of the human race, from the want of foresight, are often obliged to change plans which had been formed with the most cautious deliberation, and to deviate from the most approved and established rules of conduct: but with the Father of Lights there is no variableness, neither shadow of turning: nor is there any appearance from which we can conclude, with the exception of the miracles recorded in the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, that it has ever been found necessary, or expedient, upon any occasion, for the Governor of the Universe to deviate from the laws, and to change the course of nature, which have been contrived

by infinite wisdom, to accomplish the purposes of infinite benevolence.

IV. Let us all zealously *perform the duties* which are imposed upon us by the exigencies of the season.

While we acknowledge the hand of God in the present remarkable visitation of his providence, and wait with humble submission for the appointed issue, let us be active in discharging the duties which are now especially incumbent. And the obvious duty of the present season is, the relief of the poor, who suffer grievously under its uncommon pressure. The indigent have now an especial claim upon the humanity of the affluent. And having been deprived by the immediate visitation of divine Providence, of the usual means of support, they are, as it were, cast by Providence upon the beneficence of those who are able to administer to their relief. It is much to the credit of the humanity and benevolence of this great metropolis, that unusual exertions have been, and continue to be made, for that purpose: and it will assuredly be

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found, that the liberal and kind-hearted will not be losers in the end. For he that hath pity upon the poor lendeth unto the Lord, and that which he hath given, HE will pay him again.



SERMON XIV.

THE UNITY OF GOD ASSERTED AND PROVED.

MARK, xii. 32.

There is one God, and there is none other but He.

THIS is a proposition to which every Christian is ready to give a verbal assent, and to the importance of which no one will hesitate to subscribe. But when I consider the abstruse nature, and the refined texture of the argument by which this doctrine is supported ; the number and the plausibility of the objections by which it is opposed ; the prevalence of polytheism and idolatry in all ages and countries, and the number, I may say the myriads, of those who, while they acknowledge the divine unity in words, contradict this doctrine in their creeds, and offer equal homage to more than One divine person, I cannot assent to the judg-

ment of those who maintain that the UNITY OF GOD is a kind of natural notion, or self-evident principle, which must be admitted by every person of common understanding who pays the least attention to the subject. On the contrary, the speculative difficulty, and the great practical importance of the doctrine, appear to me to be so considerable as to render a divine interposition, to reveal and to confirm this sacred truth, as in the case of the doctrine of a future life, in the highest degree expedient, and worthy of the compassion of the Universal Parent towards his frail and erring human offspring.

It is my present design to produce what appear to me the most plausible and satisfactory arguments in favour of the UNITY OF GOD—to state and reply to the principal objections against it—to illustrate the importance of the doctrine—and to suggest some useful inferences from the subject.

I. Of the arguments which are alleged in support of the UNITY OF GOD, the

1. First is that which is deriyed from NECESSARY EXISTENCE.

A self-existent being exists not in consequence of the will and power of another, but from a natural necessity of being, from an impossibility of non-existence. Necessity cannot, indeed, with propriety be called the cause of its existence, it is rather the reason why it exists. But *necessity* is absolute, simple, uniform. There cannot be two absolute necessities, and therefore there cannot be two necessarily existent beings. It is, therefore, as impossible that there should be two infinite beings, as that there should be two infinite spaces.

This is an argument to which I am disposed to allow great weight. I have no doubt, that if we could perfectly comprehend the divine nature, we should see that there is a natural impossibility that God should not exist, or that he should exist otherwise than he does, or be any thing but what he is—that he is the necessary subject of all possible perfections, and that the existence of two such beings would be a contradiction. But though all these speculations appear to me very probable, and

though I cannot withhold my assent from them, I must, at the same time, confess that they are beyond the comprehension of the human intellect. We know not ourselves. Our limited understanding falters, when it attempts to comprehend the nature and the mode of our own derived, precarious, shadowy existence. How, then, can it grasp the nature and attributes of an infinite being?

2. The second argument which I shall mention, is, indeed, an argument of considerable refinement, but when it is maturely examined, it will, I think, appear not destitute of weight; and it is more within the limits of human comprehension than that which has been already stated. It is this. Two or more infinite beings would PERFECTLY COINCIDE with each other, and to our apprehension would BECOME ONE AND THE SAME BEING. We may, indeed, image two finite beings as exactly equal, and in every respect similar, without being numerically one. Two men may have the same age, the same stature, the same countenance,

the same capacity, the same thoughts, the same will, the same affections and habits, they may be supposed to utter the same words, and to perform the same actions—yet if they should occupy different portions of space, if they were separate from each other, and existed in different places, they would never be, nor be conceived to be, the same person. But could it for one moment be imagined, that the two individuals occupied the same space, the numerical diversity would be instantly lost, and the two persons would be, and would be conceived to be, numerically one. And this conclusion would hold far more forcibly with respect to the existence of two infinite beings. These beings would both be self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient, and immutable: they must both be perfectly powerful, perfectly wise, and perfectly good: they must both have the same views, the same will, the same purpose; and must both exert the same energy, at the same time, in the same way. One could not have a thought distinct from the other, or perform a different action; for

each would always will and do that which, at the same instant, in the same circumstances, would be the best. Both would occupy infinite space, and infinite time, and neither could withdraw himself from any portion of space, or any point of duration, so that the two ideas would completely coalesce into one: and the existence of two infinite beings cannot even be conceived as possible.

This is an argument for the unity of God which, though not obvious, appears to be both intelligible and conclusive, and to reflect great honour upon those learned and pious men by whom it was proposed and illustrated.*

3. To admit the existence of more Gods than One is UNNECESSARY, and contradictory to the established principles of philosophical reasoning.

Two principles are assumed in philosophy as the basis of all sound reasoning, the premises from which alone legitimate conclusions can be drawn, viz. That every ef-

* Locke, Wellaston, and others.

fect must have an adequate cause, and that causes are not to be multiplied without necessity : in other words, that no more causes are to be admitted than what are necessary to account for existing phenomena. Of the existence of ONE God we possess evidence the most satisfactory and convincing. For without the intervention of an original, intelligent, powerful, and benevolent Cause, we cannot account for the phenomena of the intellectual and moral world : without the existence of such a being, nothing could begin to be, and no change could take place in the appearances and circumstances of beings actually existing. It is, therefore, highly reasonable to believe that one God exists, and they who deny this fundamental truth shut their eyes against the clearest light, and fall into the most palpable absurdity.

But of the existence of more gods than ONE, we have not the slightest evidence. For there is not a single phenomenon in the universe, not a single event which takes place in the remotest regions of space, not a

ingle individual which begins to exist, whose being, powers, and operations, may not be as easily accounted for upon the hypothesis of one original, intelligent, and omnipotent Cause, as upon that of a thousand Gods. He, therefore, who believes in the existence of one God, is justified in his belief by the most clear and satisfactory evidence; for the existence of such a being is necessary to the existence of all other beings. But to believe in a plurality of Gods, is to believe a proposition totally destitute of all evidence. As one self-existent, intelligent, omnipotent being, is perfectly competent to the production of all things that exist.

This argument, if it does not absolutely prove that there is but ONE God, proves, at least, that there is no reason to believe the existence of a plurality of Gods.

4. That argument for the divine unity which is commonly regarded as the most obvious and satisfactory, is derived from the UNITY OF DESIGN in the structure of the universe.

It seems highly improbable that two or more equal, independent, original beings, each of whom is competent to the formation and support of a universe, should unite in forming the same system, and in carrying on the same plan, so that the creatures of one should be dependent upon those of the other. But the plan of the universe, as far as it falls under our observation, is uniform. The solar system is a regular and harmonious structure, in which the planetary orbs perform their appointed revolutions upon their respective axes, and move round the sun in periods mathematically correct; and the secondaries, by the same law, revolve around their primaries, and with them in their annual orbits about the sun, with strict mathematical precision. And, as the design of these motions in the planet which we inhabit, is to accommodate the inhabitants in their respective climates, with light and heat, there is every reason to believe that the final cause is the same with regard to every other planet in the same system. And there are not wanting arguments to prove

that the system itself is connected with other systems, and clusters of systems of suns and worlds, so that the immense universe forms one grand and stupendous whole.

Also, in the world in which we dwell, which is the only one in the structure of which we are materially concerned, or of which we have any knowledge, we see a beautiful co-operation of means tending to the same important end, the happiness of the creatures of God.

The inanimate and vegetable productions of the globe, as well as the materials of which it is composed, and its convenient divisions into land and water, are all subservient to the accommodation of the animal and rational inhabitants: and the animal creation are clearly intended to supply food and clothing for man, as well as to labour for his use: while the interest, as well as the duty of man, leads him to feed, protect, and shelter the animals he employs. In a word, all things are essentially connected with all, and there is not in the created universe, as far as our observation ex-

tends, an insulated, detached, unconnected being. And, as far as we can judge, the tendency of the whole system, and of each of its parts, is to promote moral discipline and improvement, and to accomplish ultimate universal virtue and happiness.

Now, if the design is *one*, and if all the works of nature, whether animate or inanimate, animal or rational, contribute in their respective stations to the accomplishment of that *one* design, how reasonable is it to conclude, that the Great Artificer of all is *ONE* being, and that it is *one* and the same God whose wisdom and goodness prompted and contrived the magnificent plan, and whose omnipotence is continually employed in carrying it into effect.

It is true, that this argument from unity of design does not absolutely demonstrate the unity of God, because it is possible that two or more intelligent and active beings may combine in the production and direction of the same system. But the presumption from analogy is, that of *ONE* great Architect, *ONE* presiding Intelligence, *ONE*

governing Will, ONE energetic Power. If we behold a vast and magnificent edifice, the several parts of which are constructed in exact proportion to each other, and all together contribute with the most perfect symmetry to constitute one uniform and splendid whole, we naturally conclude that this admired effect is the product of one enlightened and energetic mind: and by parity of reason we conclude, till evidence be shewn to the contrary, that the Author of the immense, and beautiful, and harmonious structure of the universe is one infinite, all-comprehending Mind.

If it should be objected, that there may be other systems of being, which may be the productions of other gods; it may be answered, that such a supposition is gratuitous and inadmissible, and that, at any rate, we know nothing, and can affirm nothing, of any system but that to which we ourselves belong, and can owe no religious duties to any being but to the Lord our Maker, who is the only original being with whom we have to do. But the supposition

of another God is wholly unsupported, and ought not to be made. For if we know, and can reason upon the subject, two infinite beings are as impossible as two infinite spaces : and, as I have already proved, they must necessarily coalesce into one another, and become one and the same being.

It has been urged that our *observation is too limited to justify the conclusion* that unity of design pervades the whole created universe. But we can only reason from what we know. And as far as our sphere of observation extends, we see a unity of design pervading the works of nature, and the more we penetrate into the immense regions of the universe, the more we discover that all its parts are subject to the same general laws, and that all the several parts are connected together, and combine to form one great and magnificent whole : in which we have reason to believe that all the parts are so linked together, that no alteration could take place, even in the remotest star, which would not be felt as a

serious injury to this world and its inhabitants. The more we know of the works of nature, the more we see of the relations of the various parts to the one great and magnificent whole, and of the tendencies of things to wise and beneficent ends. Many phenomena which were formerly deemed defects, have, in consequence of modern discoveries, been proved to be useful to the general system ; and from what we know, it is fair to argue by analogy to what is unknown, and there is no fact which can be proved to contradict this analogy.

But the objection assumes a still bolder form. We are told that the mixture of evil with good contradicts the assumption of unity of design. The constitution of the natural world is, say some, apparently benevolent ; but that of the moral world is malignant and mischievous. If, then, we argue from the apparent design, we should conclude that *two beings* are concerned in the formation of the universe : the one *good*, the other *evil*.

This objection would indeed be insur-

mountable could it be proved, which it never can, that any of the laws and phenomena of the universe are intrinsically and purely evil, and without any beneficial tendency. But it is plain, to an attentive observer, that good, both natural and moral, greatly preponderates over evil. Also, that all evil, moral as well as natural, tends directly or indirectly to the production of good, and that of a sublime and exalted nature, which good could not have existed without the antecedent evil. Further, that evil, having answered the purpose of its introduction, tends to exterminate itself: and finally, that it never can be proved that an equal quantity of good could possibly have been produced without the mixture of evil: and from the wisdom of God, considered in connexion with the power and goodness which, from the most superficial survey of his works we cannot but ascribe to him, we may reasonably conclude it to have been impossible: unless any one would presume to assert that God chose evil for its own sake. So that we may reasonably

conclude, at least for any thing that can be proved to the contrary, that all the evil which exists in the universe may be subservient to the perfection of the general system, and even necessary to the production of the greatest good.

Other arguments have been produced in support of the unity of the Great Supreme, which it may be proper to mention in this connexion, though they may not be regarded as of equal force with those which have been already stated.

It has been observed that it is more honourable to conceive of God as ONE and UNRIVALLED, than as one amongst a number of equal and co-ordinate deities. This is true. But this is no argument against the existence of a plurality of Gods. The perfection we ascribe to the Supreme Being relates to his inherent excellences, and not to any thing extrinsic. And from these it would be no derogation if it could be proved that other beings might exist who possessed similar attributes.

It has also been alleged, that if other

Gods existed they would be entitled to our veneration and homage, though they were not our creators; and therefore *their existence would be revealed* to us. But it is hard to say of what use this knowledge would be to mankind; and it is most certain that human adoration could be of no advantage to, and could not be regarded as conferring any honour upon these supposed divinities. There is no reason, therefore, to believe that the existence of such beings would be the subject of a divine revelation.

The venerable archbishop Tillotson argues that, "if there be more Gods than one, all but one are needless. But necessary existence is essential to the Deity; therefore there can be but One God." But the fallacy of the archbishop's argument lies in the two-fold meaning of the word *necessity*. To exist by a necessity of nature is one thing, but to be necessary to account for the production of an effect is another. One is an absolute, the other is a modal necessity; and these two necessities are perfectly distinct; and they are not to

be confounded together. The existence of the architect is necessary to the existence of the house ; it does not follow that the architect is necessarily existent.

Upon the whole, from this brief review of the question, we may justly conclude that the light of nature, correctly and steadily pursued, would lead to the grand conclusion that there is ONE GOD, and there is none other but HE. At the same time it must be allowed, that the argument from reason, however satisfactory, and even demonstrative, is very far from being obvious to the great mass of mankind ; to whom nevertheless it is a doctrine of the utmost IMPORTANCE ; and this,

Secondly, is what I now proceed to state and illustrate.

And the whole may be comprehended under this one general proposition, viz.

That the doctrine of the proper, sole, undivided *unity* of God, is an effectual preservative from the manifold evils of *polytheism*.

POLYTHEISM is either *heathen* or *Christian*.

Heathen Polytheism was of the grossest kind, and productive of the very worst effects upon the character and morals. The gods of what has quaintly, and most absurdly been styled the *elegant* mythology* of Greece and Rome, were beings of the most profligate character. There is not a vice with which they were not chargeable. There is no crime which did not find its patron in the multitude of heathen deities. Their votaries encouraged themselves in wickedness by the example of their gods. And many of the rites of heathen worship were scandalously immoral. The polytheism and idolatry of the heathen was, beyond comparison, worse than atheism itself. And because they did not choose to retain God in their knowledge, therefore God gave them up to a reprobate mind.

Christian Polytheism is either *Popish* or *Protestant*.

Popish Polytheism is partly extravagant and absurd, partly immoral, and universally impious and inconsistent with that reve-

* See Gibbon.

rence and homage which is appropriate to the Supreme Being. The doctrine of transubstantiation, or the conversion of a morsel of bread into God by the priest's muttering a few barbarous words over it, is the grossest insult which was ever offered to the common sense of mankind. It exceeds every thing absurd and monstrous in heathen mythology. The celebrated orator of Rome remarks that, "of all the absurdities which had been introduced into the popular religion, no men had ever thought of worshipping the bread they eat." This extravagance of absurdity was reserved for men professing themselves Christians. The worship of saints is an impiety similar to that of heathen idolatry. Indeed it is the same worship under another name ; and the temples, the images, the altars, and the invocations which were formerly appropriated to the gods and goddesses of the ancient mythology, are now applied to Peter and Paul, to the Virgin Mary and St. Anne, and to other saints, or pretended saints, some of whom were as profligate and as

malignant as any which disgraced the heathen calendar.

Protestant Polytheism is neither so extravagant nor so pernicious as that of heathenism or of popery ; but it is much to be censured as a lamentable deviation from the faith and worship of the true God, and as attended with many evil consequences. In protestant countries, which profess to have renounced the errors of antichristian Rome, there are Three Beings who, in the creed of many churches, usurp the throne and the prerogatives of the ONE Supreme. The Son of God, Jesus, the holy prophet of Nazareth, is advanced, in direct contradiction to his own explicit declarations, to an equality with the Supreme Creator and Lord of all. And the Holy Spirit, that divine energy, by which the prophets were inspired, and were enabled to perform miraculous works, and to foretel future events, is advanced from an energy to a person, and from a person is raised to a rank in the godhead equal to that of the Father and the Son. *The principle of evil*

and the *persecuting power* are personified in the New Testament, under the name of Satan and the Devil : and this imaginary being is mistaken for a real person, possessing the attributes of omniscience and omnipresence, and of power inferior to none but that of God himself ; and though this imaginary malignant spirit is not called a god, he is in fact deified ; for attributes are ascribed to him which belong to God alone ; and that fear and dread of him is rooted in the hearts of many, which ought not to be felt for any created being. Thus these imaginary deities share in the homage and worship which is only and wholly due to the Great Supreme, and rob the true God of his honour. It is also notorious that in some cases the Almighty Father is almost wholly excluded from acts of worship, and is regarded merely as an object of terror, while the grateful affections are transferred to his supposed equal, and more gracious and merciful Son.

Nor can those Christians be entirely acquitted of polytheism, who, while they deny

the necessary existence of the Son, and his equality with the Father, and decline offering direct addresses and acts of worship, nevertheless ascribe to him those works of creation and providence, which reason and revelation attribute to the immediate agency of the Supreme Being, and which unquestionably entitle the author of them to the homage and worship of the creatures whom he hath made; agreeably to the exhortation of the Psalmist (Psalm xiv.), "O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord our Maker, for He is our God." But it is hard for error to be consistent with itself; and the high importance of the doctrine of the divine Unity may be justly inferred from the many practical evils into which men have fallen by their deviation from it.

I shall close the discourse with a few reflections.

1. How *great is our obligation to divine revelation*, which *teaches* this momentous doctrine, and has set it in the clearest light!

This important truth, which lies at the

foundation of all rational and acceptable religion, seems to have been early and totally lost from the world. Abraham himself was originally an idolater. But he and his family were selected by the divine wisdom to preserve, and to bear a constant and public testimony to the Unity of God. This is the main design and object of the Jewish revelation. The first precept of those which were engraven by the finger of God upon the tablets of stone given to Moses in the mount, was this, "Thou shalt have no other God but me." And Moses solemnly calls upon the Israelites to hear and to attend to the important declaration. The Lord is our God, the Lord is ONE. But the Jewish revelation was not calculated for universal use; and the heathen world lay for many ages under a gross delusion. It has, indeed, been asserted by many, that some of the heathen sages believed and taught the unity of God. But it appears from the writings of these philosophers and their disciples, that they entertained many doubts upon the

subject ; and at any rate they countenanced and supported the idolatry of their country by joining, and teaching their disciples to join in the worship of their country's gods. This was the advice of Socrates himself ; who nevertheless argues concerning the wisdom and benevolence of divine Providence, in a manner which would do credit to the most enlightened Christian. Yet still he hesitates upon the subject of the divine Unity ; commonly adopting the language of polytheism ; and in his last moments ordering a cock to be sacrificed to Æsculapius. The world by wisdom knew not God. To dispel this gross moral darkness, the christian doctrine rose upon the world like the morning sun, with salvation in his beams. Of this divine religion the Unity of God is the foundation stone. Our Lord himself taught that the primary truth, that doctrine which lies at the foundation of all religion is this, " The Lord is our God, the Lord is ONE." The apostles declare, that the design of their mission is to convert men from the worship

of idols to the knowledge of the living and true God. And to us, who profess to receive the apostolic doctrine in its primitive purity, there is but ONE GOD, and One Mediator between God and man, the MAN Christ Jesus. When we recollect what the mischievous consequences of polytheism have been, and what a tendency the least deviation from the true doctrine concerning the divine nature has to generate still greater and more important errors, we cannot but acknowledge that we have the greatest reason for thankfulness, that the divine Unity is so explicitly affirmed in the New Testament, that even those who hold opinions the most opposite to it in fact, are under the necessity of assenting to it in words, and of endeavouring to reconcile their own strange and unscriptural notions with that which Jesus himself has declared to be the fundamental doctrine of his religion.

2. Their *zeal is not to be condemned* who are jealous for the important doctrine of the divine Unity, and whose labours are

principally directed to the recovery and the universal restoration of that long lost truth, the unrivalled Supremacy of the One God and Father of all.

Because, by these means they are endeavouring to recover the world, and especially the christian world, from error to truth, and from corrupt systems of doctrine, the tendency of which is to rob the true God of his honour, and to substitute polytheism, idolatry, and all their mischievous consequences in the place of the knowledge, the worship, the love, and the service of the One, Supreme, all-perfect Being, whose transcendent attributes, and governing wisdom, may justly occupy all our thoughts, absorb all our affections, and engross all our religious homage; and who will not give his glory to another. In these labours they act in harmony with the patriarchs and prophets of the ancient dispensation, and with Jesus and his apostles under the New. And if their conduct springs from right motives, and is animated by christian zeal, tempered with christian, not

with worldly prudence, they shall not ultimately fail, either of the desired success, or of the due reward. Nor let them wonder if, in the prosecution of their holy and honourable purpose, their conduct should be harshly censured by those whom it is their desire and endeavour to instruct, and to reclaim; if by those who are deeply infected with the prejudices of the age, or who are too indolent and irresolute to inquire, or, who desire to make a fair appearance in the world, or, who regard religion as a tool of state, and who make the profession of Christianity a stepping-stone to the temple of mammon, or, whose professed design it is to keep mankind in stupid and servile ignorance, let them not be surprised, if by such persons their conduct is traduced, their motives are vilified, if they are held up to contempt as fanatics, and are exposed to detestation as disturbers of the public peace, and as enemies to their country, to its laws, to its government, and to its religion; if they are represented as unworthy of being acknowledged as members of

the christian community, and as deserving the animadversions of the civil power ; if they are even exposed to the fury of a lawless mob, and banished to the utmost verge of civil society.* Generous friends and benefactors of mankind ! honourable confessors in the cause of christian truth ! Be not dismayed. So persecuted they the prophets which were before you. Thus did they insult and injure our divine master himself. Your labour in the Lord shall not be in vain. Be it my ambition to breathe your spirit, to share in your reproach, and, if such be the will of God, to participate in your losses and your sufferings, so that I may participate in your superior wisdom, in your disinterested love of truth, in your christian fortitude, in your mental peace, and in your final triumph.

* This alludes to the case of Dr. Priestley, who thought it necessary to take refuge in America from the persecution to which his zeal for the divine Unity exposed him in his native land. Thank God, we live in better times, and Unitarianism is now protected by law.

3. The doctrine of the divine Unity is of great PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE.

It is represented by our Lord as lying at the foundation of all virtuous practice. In reply to the question, which is the first commandment of all, he declares, in the most solemn and earnest language, “The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord is thy God, the Lord is *One*. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy understanding, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment, and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.” He that truly and heartily believes that God is *ONE*, will worship and serve him with undivided homage; and, regarding all mankind as children of the same Father, he will love them with fraternal affection, and by unceasing endeavours to promote knowledge, virtue, and happiness, he will aspire to become perfect, as his Father in heaven is perfect.



SERMON XV.

THE BLESSING OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE.

1 PETER, iii. 16.

Having a good conscience.

To a good conscience three qualities are indispensably requisite: a competent knowledge of the rule of duty—habitual conformity to it—and frequent, serious, self-examination.

1. Conscience is the principle by which we *approve* or *condemn* action, affection, and character, as they conform to, or deviate from, the apprehended rule of life. To a good conscience it is essential that the rule of duty should be agreeable to Truth; otherwise, conscience will be erroneous in its decisions: it will approve where it ought to condemn, or condemn without reason, and even where it ought to approve.

A GOOD CONSCIENCE forms a *just estimate*

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of the moral value of action, habit, and character. It neither mistakes the nature, nor the relative value of moral actions: it does not call good evil, nor evil good: it does not over-rate things that are indifferent: much less does it undervalue matters which truly possess a moral character.

A good conscience takes great pains to enlighten the understanding in moral truth, and uses with diligence and perseverance all the necessary means for this purpose. It exercises reason upon moral subjects, and deliberately estimates the moral value of habit, affection, action, and character. It learns from history, observation and experience; and thankfully accepts of instruction derived from the conversation, the writings, the teaching, and the example of the virtuous and the wise. But its chief directory is the holy scripture, which reveals in clear and explicit language the rule of duty, which suggests the most powerful motives to virtuous practice, and which exhibits many edifying examples of virtue and piety: and above all, that of Jesus, in

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which human excellence was carried to its highest perfection, and was displayed in the most interesting circumstances.

A good conscience discerns the extent and spirituality of the divine law : that the design of it is to regulate the temper and character throughout : that it extends not only to external actions, but to the thoughts and purposes of the heart : that it not only forbids the act of sin, but even the thought of foolishness : that it requires purity of motive, as well as decency of conduct.

2. Where there is a competent knowledge of right, but an habitual deviation from the law of rectitude, the decision of an enlightened conscience will indeed be *just, but terrible* : it will be the stern sentence of an incorruptible and inflexible judge, not the mild language of an approving friend. It is essential, therefore, to a good conscience, that the character and conduct should be habitually virtuous.

This habit of virtue must appear in the whole conduct of life. Some deviations from the strict rule of duty, in creatures so

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imperfect, are perhaps inevitable ; but they must in no case be allowed, or even tolerated. And an enlightened conscience never suffers any voluntary transgression, nor any wilful omission of duty to pass without reproof. Nor will it ever bestow clear and decided approbation where habitual virtue is wanting.

WORDS, as well as actions, fall under the cognizance of this all-controlling power. He that would keep a clear conscience, must set a watch upon the door of his lips. All profane words, all vain and foolish speeches, all loose and licentious conversation, are prohibited by an enlightened conscience ; which requires *sound speech* that cannot be condemned ; conversation always innocent, sometimes instructive ; and is far from forbidding the cheerfulness which is, indeed, its legitimate offspring, and ought to be its constant companion.

It is the prerogative of the divine law that it extends even to the THOUGHTS : and all the *imaginations* of the heart are subject to the control of conscience. All wicked



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thoughts—all mischievous, malicious, and revengeful purposes—all foolish and impure imaginations—all impious and blasphemous conceptions, must be expelled from the mind. Nor should vain, trifling, useless thoughts be permitted to reside there. The thought of foolishness is sin : and conscience will never yield entire approbation till all the powers of the soul, and every thought and feeling of the heart, are brought into complete subjection to the authority of Christ.

All the habits of the mind must be conformable to the laws of virtue. One single vicious habit is sufficient to destroy all peace of mind, and to exclude from all title to the kingdom of God. Nor will enlightened conscience ever be bribed to silence, till every rebellious affection is exterminated. When all affections and habits are reduced to the standard of virtue, then, and not till then, will conscience whisper, Peace.

The principles of action, be they what they may, are all subject to the cognizance

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of conscience, and must be just and honourable to secure its approbation. When a man is seen to perform worthy actions, when he appears to be just, and generous, and good, charity requires that we should think well of him, and should attribute such actions to right principles, unless we have just reason to suspect the contrary. But this will not satisfy conscience. If that all-observing power discerns that actions which appear meritorious to the world, flow from mean and selfish principles, or that the form of religion is substituted for its power, and that the guise of sanctity is but a cloak for vice, or if it perceives that the springs are mean and polluted, whatever the brilliancy, or even the utility of the action may be, and whatever opinion candid and good men may entertain of the agent, conscience passes her severest censure upon it, and suffers not hypocrisy to enjoy with impunity the applause of virtue. But where the motive is right, she fixes the stamp of her approbation, even though the

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action may perhaps exceed the limits of strict discretion, though the effect may fall short of the generous purpose, and though, through error or malignity, it may encounter the rude censure of the world.

3. To constitute approbation of conscience, frequent, *serious self-reflection is essential*, and the clear discernment of habitual conformity to the rule of duty.

Frequent self-examination is a very strong presumption in favour of a good conscience. As a man whose affairs are in disorder loves not to look into his accounts, so he whose conscience charges him with habitual disobedience, has little inclination to examine into the state of his own mind. But the man whose transactions are successful, and who has reason to expect a balance in his favour, will take pleasure in looking into his affairs : and the man whose habitual conduct is correct, will take pleasure in looking into the state of his heart, and in settling his account with conscience. Thus he acquires the satisfaction of conscious integrity, he

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learns to correct what is amiss, and to confirm and improve virtuous habits and affections.

The value of an approving conscience has been attested by wise and good men in all ages. "He that hath a good conscience," says the Roman lyrist, "needs no weapons of war: yea, though the world should burst asunder, he would stand fearless amidst the mighty ruins." "Great peace have they who love thy law," says a poet of a still higher order, "and nothing shall offend them." "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace," says the Hebrew prophet, "whose mind is staid on thee, because he trusteth in thee." And again, "the work of righteousness is peace, and the effect thereof quietness and assurance for ever." To which we may add the testimony of the apostle Paul, "Our rejoicing is this, the testimony of our conscience:" as though he had said, whatever other sources of happiness we may possess, the greatest of all is that which we derive from the testimony of an approving conscience.

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The *agonies of an accusing conscience* abundantly demonstrate the value of a conscience that is at ease. Every other pain is supportable ; and bodily sufferings of the most excruciating kind have been borne with firmness, and even with cheerfulness. But a wounded spirit who can bear ? Proportionably delightful is the state of a mind at rest. A good man is satisfied from himself.

A reasonable being cannot reflect upon *a course of action agreeable to its nature*, worthy of its excellent faculties and powers, corresponding with its dignity, and congruous to the relations in which it stands, without a consciousness of great satisfaction. And this delight is exceedingly enhanced by its inseparable connexion with an assurance of the divine favour, and the joyful anticipation of future reward. “ Brethren, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence towards God.” In these circumstances we are allowed to look up to God as a Father : and if children, then are we heirs : heirs of God, and joint heirs with Jesus Christ.

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The comfort of an approving conscience is *steady* and *uniform*. It is not a tumultuous and rapturous joy. Such transports are mostly mechanical, and dependent upon the accidental state of the animal spirits: and they are usually of short duration. But the satisfaction which arises from the testimony of conscience is tranquil and serene. It is justly named *peace*, a fixed state of mind. It is the sweet sunshine of the breast. Some gratifications are dependent upon bodily health and spirits; this least of all. Indeed, so frail a machine is man, that a shattered and disordered state of the nervous system will occasionally produce depression of spirits, and will often prevent the most excellent characters from enjoying that inward satisfaction to which their integrity entitles them. But this is not a common case. Generally speaking, the testimony of conscience is in no degree affected by bodily pain: and the satisfaction of an approving mind is often highest, when the frail system of mortality verges upon dissolution.

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The pleasures of an approving conscience *rise superior* to almost all others of which human nature is susceptible. They gratify its noblest powers. It were ingratitude to despise the gratifications of *sense*. When tasted with moderation, and in due subordination to superior objects, they are innocent and allowable, and ought to be received with gratitude. But these pleasures are gross and evanescent, and are chiefly useful as they tend to generate and cherish the social affections. But peace of conscience is, as it were, heavenly food. It never palls upon the appetite: it never stupifies the faculties: it can never be taken to excess: it leaves no bitter reflections.

Imagination is the source of a great variety of pleasing and elegant combinations of ideas. The *intellectual* powers engaged in the pursuit of Truth, are the source of graver and more substantial delight. But what are all the ardent flights of fancy, what the amazing discoveries in science and philosophy, compared with that peace of mind which passeth all description?

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Friendship, society, the tender and endearing connexions and relations of *domestic life*, are sources of the most exquisite delight which earth can give. But there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother, whose friendship is far more valuable than that of the dearest friend in the world. And that friend is conscience. Conscience is a friend always at hand, whose society and conversation is always welcome and refreshing.

The pleasures of *devotion* may be supposed to vie with those of conscience. But what God hath joined together, far be it from man to put asunder. True devotion cannot dwell where an approving conscience is a stranger. God has no pleasure in wickedness.

Finally, Peace of conscience is essential to *every other* enjoyment. An *evil* conscience, like a subtle poison, diffuses its deadly venom over every comfort of life ; while a good conscience, like some noble cordial, exhilarates the spirits, and adds a zest to all other innocent gratifications. It

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is hostile to no enjoyment that is worthy of a reasonable being.

The testimony of an approving conscience is an *abiding support* in all the scenes and vicissitudes of life. Conscience is not like many who pretend friendship, and who, though they flatter in prosperity, will forsake in adversity. It is a friend that will cleave to us in every vicissitude of fortune: it will yield the best support where it is most wanted, and will abound when other resources fail.

Possessed of this inestimable treasure, a virtuous man may sometimes be called by divine Providence to change his habitation, his employment, and his connexions in life; to quit places, friends, and connexions which long custom had endeared, and to enter upon other connexions and employments which, from novelty, or other causes, may be irksome and disagreeable. But conscience is his companion still. And every place is a home, every burden is light, every difficulty is softened, every path is smooth, every employment is pleasing, every connexion

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agreeable, where a good conscience is an inmate of the breast, and gently diffuses her all-healing balm.

A good conscience will yield support when prospects are most dark and discouraging. For what can he fear whose heart does not upbraid him? Wherever he goes he is defended by an impenetrable shield. He is clothed in celestial panoply. The eternal God is his refuge, and underneath are everlasting arms.

In *personal affliction* the testimony of conscience is the best support. When youth, and age, and vigour are fled, when the days of darkness and of sorrow draw near, when old age steals on, and pain and sickness seize upon the shattered frame, when earthly enjoyments are miserable comforters, and emptiness and vanity are written upon them all, in that dark season a good conscience is the best support, it diffuses radiance through the gloom, and speaks consolation to the heart.

Under the ingratitude of friends, or the censures of the world, when evil is returned

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for good, and hatred for love, when wrong constructions are put upon well-intentioned actions, when unprovoked malice gives vent to unmerited reproach, when friends forsake, and enemies insult, then, at that trying crisis, the approbation of conscience is the noblest, the most heart-reviving cordial. I appeal, will the righteous sufferer say, to a higher tribunal. To God will I commit my cause. He knows my integrity, and will in due time vindicate my character. When he hath tried me I shall come forth as gold.

Sincere, and earnest, and long-protracted endeavours to do good, often *fail of success*, and the most promising hopes are sometimes disappointed. Exhortations, instructions, and prayers are offered in vain. The recollection is painful and discouraging. But conscious integrity and faithfulness will yield the best support. If the laborious but unsuccessful instructor should, (which however he will not often do,) see reason to complain, "I have laboured in vain, and spent my strength for nought," conscience

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will whisper the consolatory language, "Nevertheless thy work is with the Lord, and thy reward is with thy God."

In a season of *public danger and apprehension*, amidst national calamity and alarm, in the view of civil commotion, or foreign invasion, a good conscience is the best preparative for whatever may happen. It arms the mind with fortitude. It inspires courage and hope. It fears God, and it fears nought beside. It strengthens the heart. It nerves the arm: and looks with confidence to the God of battles, who will smile propitiously on the righteous cause.

There is an hour approaching when heart and flesh shall fail, when earthly comforts will disappear, when the best friends can only sympathize, without being able to administer relief. There is a journey at hand which we must take alone. There is a warfare from which there is no discharge. Conscience is the only friend that can stand by us in the painful struggle, and can administer that support which will then be so much needed. An approving conscience

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can triumph over death, and in the near view of the final conflict can exclaim with rapture, O death, where is thy sting! O grave, where is thy victory!

The day is coming that shall burn as a furnace. The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised. Heaven and earth shall flee away. The judge shall appear in the clouds: in his own glory: in the glory of the Father: attended with all the pomp of heaven. We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Actions and characters will then be scrutinized. Tempers and habits will be reviewed: and thoughts will be brought to light. It is the great day of his wrath, and who will be able to stand? None but the man who rejoices in the testimony of his conscience. He now thinks of that day without terror: he shall then bear a part in its grand solemnities without dismay. He shall appear unappalled in the presence of his master and his lord: an enlightened conscience bears its approving testimonies, and the judge will confirm the testimony, and pronounce the

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sentence, Well done, good and faithful servant.

Finally, This exquisite delight will be *everlasting* and *ever-growing*. In the New Jerusalem, in that state of glory and felicity into which the righteous shall be introduced after awaking from the long slumbers of the grave, the servants of God will not rest day nor night from the sacred offices of benevolence and piety : and every fresh act will add to the gratifications of an approving conscience. What, then, will be the amount of this felicity, when the infinite succession of ages shall have multiplied these actions to an infinite and incomprehensible sum, unmingled and undebased by one single unworthy action, affection, or thought !

Upon the review of this interesting subject, how natural is it to reflect,

1. Upon the *extreme folly* of those who slight and neglect the acquisition of an approving conscience.

And who sacrifice this inestimable treasure, this pearl of great price, to the solici-

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tations of avarice, ambition, or pleasure. Peace of conscience cannot be bought too dear. It is well worth every sacrifice which may be necessary to secure it. And nothing can compensate for its loss.

2. How solicitous should we be *to attain and secure* this inestimable blessing.

This peace which passeth all understanding, and the possession of which alone constitutes the true happiness of a reasonable being. How earnest, therefore, should we be in *exercising* ourselves, as the apostle expresses it, to maintain a conscience void of offence.

3. What reason have they for *content and cheerfulness* in every condition of life, who enjoy the testimony of an approving conscience.

For this is the sweetest balm of human life: it is itself an inexhaustible source of comfort at present, and under the righteous government of Supreme Wisdom and Benevolence, it is the surest pledge of happiness hereafter. How, then, can they fail to be content and happy in every situation



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and condition of life, acquiescing with a grateful spirit in the wise allotments of divine Providence, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God.



SERMON XVI.

THE EVILS OF A MISINFORMED AND AN ACCUSING
CONSCIENCE.

HEBREWS, x. 22.

Having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience.

CONSCIENCE is that moral power which approves or condemns motive, habit, action, or character, as they are perceived to agree with or to depart from the rule of duty.

Conscience is either *good* or *evil*. A *good* conscience is that which forms a right estimate of the rule of life, and which approves motives and actions which agree with it. An evil conscience is either a misinformed, or a self-condemning conscience.

1. In the first place conscience may be *misinformed*.

It may approve where it ought to condemn, or it may condemn where it ought

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to approve. Conscience is by no means what many seem to apprehend, an instinctive principle. The contrary is evident from the diversity, and even the contrariety of its dictates in different circumstances.

If conscience were a natural and instinctive power, its dictates would be as invariable as those of the organs of sense. There would be no more diversity of opinion concerning right and wrong, than there is concerning light and darkness, white and black, sweet and bitter. The dictates of conscience would be uniform and universal; the same at all times and in all places, in all ages and in all countries; whereas, no fact can be more obvious than this, that actions which are regarded as perfectly innocent, or even highly meritorious in one age or country, are looked upon in other ages and countries with horror and detestation. And even in the same age and country, among those who live under the same laws, and who profess the same religion, there is a wide difference in their re-

spective estimation of moral good and evil, in exact proportion to the difference of their education in the different classes of society. They who have been educated in right principles, maintain a sacred regard to truth and justice, to honour and integrity, to benevolence and piety, whereas the unfortunate wretches who have been brought up in the haunts of vice and profligacy, consider truth and honesty as of no value, and pride themselves in their dexterity and success in fraud, falsehood, and mischief.

Conscience then, may be, and often is, misinformed ; and that sometimes to a *very great degree*.

Some are taught to regard crimes as virtues. The history of persecution, in every chapter of its dark and bloody details, illustrates and confirms the fact. It is not to be supposed that all persecutors have been hypocrites. Some have been such without a doubt ; and history proves that many of the most savage and unrelenting persecutors have been men of no religion at all ; men who have made religion the

stalking-horse of ambition and avarice, or the instrument of cruelty and revenge. But there have been persecutors who have been men of the greatest integrity and piety ; and who, in their harshest proceedings, have only followed the dictates of an erroneous conscience. "The time shall come," said our Lord to his apostles, "when whosoever killeth you shall think that he doeth God service." And the apostle Paul, previous to his conversion, verily thought that he ought to oppose the doctrine of Jesus, and madly to persecute his followers even in distant cities. The Jews, who persecuted the first believers, had a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge. The heathen, who cast the Christians to wild beasts, or who endeavoured to exterminate them by fire and sword, seriously regarded them as the declared enemies of the human race, who were conspiring to overthrow all the ancient systems of religion, to subvert all the established forms of government, and to turn the world upside down. The papists, who exposed

the protestants to the dungeons and tortures of the infernal Inquisition, and who massacred them by thousands, destroyed their bodies to save their souls, or at least to impede the propagation of what they esteemed damnable heresy. And the protestants themselves who, with gross inconsistency, persecuted each other with fines, scourging, and imprisonment, and sometimes even with death, on account of their religious differences, have hoped thereby to obstruct the progress of pestilent error, to accelerate the march of truth, and to commend themselves to God.

But persecution is not the only crime which has been mistaken for virtue. In some countries polygamy, concubinage, and incest, are esteemed innocent. In others parents are exposed and deserted when they become old and infirm, and are no longer able to maintain themselves; and in many places it has been esteemed quite innocent to expose new-born children to death. By some nations prisoners of war are enslaved or massacred, and many, even

in these days of enlightened humanity, still think it lawful to seize the persons of helpless and unoffending victims, and to transport them into foreign climes, to end their days in slavery and misery ; a crime of the blackest dye, from which this nation has happily cleared itself, though it still prevails in other countries which profess the christian name.

That must, indeed, be a *strangely perverted* and misguided conscience, which can approve of crimes like these. But the fact is undeniable. And let it be remembered, that the error of the understanding does not diminish the mischief ; perhaps not even the moral turpitude of the deed, if proper means have not been used to enlighten and rectify the moral feelings. This negligence leaves a man utterly inexcusable, whatever allowance may be made in the estimation of infinite mercy, for unavoidable ignorance, or invincible prejudice. But such misconceptions, and the dreadful evils which result from them, clearly demonstrate the indispensable necessity of

using the best means of enlightening the conscience, and of forming a just conception of the rule of duty. It likewise follows, that they, who by due consideration and inquiry, have themselves attained just views of moral subjects, are required to interfere, as occasions may occur, by all prudent and temperate means, to restrain and to counteract the mischiefs which accrue from the uncontrolled operation of misguided zeal, and an erroneous conscience.

Many whose consciences do not dictate crimes, nevertheless lay *undue stress upon trifles*, and things indifferent. In the heathen world great stress was often laid upon superstitious rites which possessed no moral value; and the Pharisees are justly accused by our Lord for the scrupulous exactness with which they paid the tithe of rue, anise, and cummin, while they neglected the important duties of justice, mercy, and fidelity. Christians of all denominations, and in all ages, have fallen into a similar error. In the church, which calls itself catholic, penances and pilgrimages,

and counting of beads, and distinctions of days, food, and dress, are, even to this day, considered as of great importance. And even in those churches which assume the title of Reformed, the same spirit has discovered itself in a different shape; and questions of the most trivial nature concerning rites, and forms, and holy seasons, and sacerdotal vestments, and fasts, and festivals, have occupied more attention than duties of indispensable obligation, or truths of the highest importance. And it too frequently happens, that a conscience thus misled, passes a severer sentence upon the omission of a trifling ceremony, than upon the violation of a moral duty. The offering at the altar of God supersedes obedience to an express, and a most important moral precept.

A wise man will apply to every subject the attention that is due to its moral importance. But there are some worthy persons who lay so much stress upon trifles, and have so many scruples concerning actions which are essentially indifferent, that

their delicate and sickly consciences are sources of continual uneasiness to themselves, and of trouble and vexation to their connexions. Their extreme scrupulosity excludes them in a great measure from the duties of social life, it lowers their character, and impedes their usefulness.

But as conscience is liable to err concerning the *rule of duty*, so likewise it is sometimes misinformed with regard to the *sanctions* of the divine law.

If *secular interest* be regarded as the only, or principal sanction of the rule of life, conscience will reproach the offender only in proportion as his profit or loss may be affected by his misconduct. If wealth be accumulated, if every returning year adds to his treasures, and enlarges the boundaries of his estates, he thinks but little of the groans, and tears, and miseries of those from whose labour it is wrung, by whose ruin his coffers are replenished, and from whose sufferings and blood his riches are accumulated.

If *reputation* be in his estimation the

principal sanction of virtue, the reproofs of conscience will be chiefly directed against those vices which expose to disgrace and ignominy ; but the rules of temperance, of justice, and of piety, will be violated with little regret.

Wrong views of the divine character will sometimes contribute to render the decisions of conscience erroneous and injurious. If the beneficent Creator, if the wise and righteous Judge of all the earth be regarded as a merciless tyrant, watching with vigilant malignity over the infirmities and failings of his creatures, and dooming them to eternal misery for every error, and for every fault, for every unguarded word, and for every vain and idle thought, conscience must in such cases be a source of exquisite and perpetual torment, for who can tell how often he offends ?

Thus it appears that conscience is liable to err, both with respect to the rule of life, and the sanctions of virtue. And an erroneous conscience may justly be styled an evil conscience, both as it misleads from

the path of duty, and as it misapplies both its commendation and its censure; speaking peace when there is no peace: and denouncing terror when there is no ground for alarm. And we cannot be too much upon our guard against the common, but pernicious error, that conscience is a natural and divinely inspired principle, which invariably prompts to what is right, and whose dictates ought, upon all occasions, to be implicitly obeyed.

Nevertheless, the *contrary extreme* must be avoided with equal care. To conclude, that because conscience is sometimes misinformed, its testimony is in all cases to be disregarded, would indeed be a fatal error. Such is the moral constitution of human nature, and such the circumstances in which men are placed, that the dictates of conscience are generally right, though with some important exceptions. Truth, honesty, and charity, are universally approved, and falsehood, fraud, and dishonesty, are universally stigmatized. These sentiments are generated by the common discipline of life,

and, generally speaking, men may as soon cease to be men, as they can divest themselves of those moral qualities which are essential to the existence of the social state.

And when conscience reproves, which it will not fail to do when the rule of right is violated, it is in vain to *affect indifference* to its admonitions. Whether right or wrong, whether the dictates of conscience be correct or incorrect, they are not to be trifled with, they will not fail to rouse the feelings and to command attention.

An accusing conscience is *exquisitely painful*, even though founded upon erroneous principles, and exercised upon indifferent objects. The neglect of a trifling observance, or a superstitious rite, will be visited with all the compunction of a moral offence. And in some cases, in which the being, the providence, and the righteous judgment of God have been called in question, and the sanctions of a future life have been treated with contempt, when the sense of shame, and the dread of public exposure, have been the only weapons

which have been left for conscience to wield, the terrors of a guilty mind have often proved insupportable, and death has been sought with avidity, as the only refuge from mental agony.

An accusing conscience is always an unwelcome companion, but it is then most formidable when its reproaches are *most just*. And the censures of a well-informed conscience will always be in exact proportion to the nature and aggravation of the offence.

The pain of an accusing conscience arises, in the first place, from the knowledge that a known principle and *rule of duty has been transgressed*.

We are all creatures of habit more than of reason, and whatever some speculative men may talk of the necessity of reasoning upon the remote consequences of all actions before you perform them, the rule, in practice, would be found impossible. Were it attempted, life would be wholly spent in speculation, and while men were deliberating upon consequences, the season for per-

formance would be past. To avoid this inconvenience, men treasure up in their minds general principles to direct their conduct upon common occasions, and never deliberate but in cases of unusual occurrence, or of peculiar importance. And the violation of an established rule is always productive of pain; and this pain is greatly aggravated by the conviction, that the rule so transgressed was founded in truth and reason.

The anguish which naturally accompanies a distempered mind, and which arises from what may be called the *dislocation of the moral powers*, contributes in a great degree to that accumulation of misery which constitutes a guilty conscience.

There is a certain *symmetry* in the affections which constitutes health and soundness of mind, and which is the source of inward peace and self-satisfaction. But when, by the violation of moral principle, the passions gain the ascendancy over the reason and the moral powers, they produce a fever of the mind, which distresses and de-

bilitates the heart, and fills the soul with anguish and dismay. Virtue is that state of mind in which every affection is in its proper place, and the very thoughts themselves are under the dominion of reason and truth. Vice is the dislocation of the faculties and moral powers, when the inferior affections usurp the place of reason and truth, and throw the whole constitution into disorder ; and happiness is as inconsistent with this mental dislocation as ease with the fracture of a limb. Vice and misery are inseparable.

The consciousness of guilt is attended with a *sense of shame* ; a passion which takes its rise from the estimation in which we are held by those amongst whom we live, a vivid sense of the importance of which is one of the earliest acquisitions of the human mind, and one of the most powerful principles of action. It not unfrequently overrules and bears down every consideration and motive of self-interest, of reason, of duty, and of all other motives combined. When therefore the spirit of a

man is conscious that his conduct is such that, if it were known, it would expose him to be pointed at by the finger of scorn and "*grinning infamy*," the very suspicion of it overwhelms him with horror, and the fear of what may happen renders life a continual and insupportable burden.

This leads me to add, that *fear*, the anticipation of what may happen both here and hereafter, is another source of exquisite misery to a guilty mind.

Conscious of unrepented guilt, convinced that there is no forgiveness without repentance, assured, that while one sinful habit remains uncontrolled, and that every vicious act confirms the habit of sin, and adds to the dread account, and makes repentance still more difficult; and well knowing, that every addition to his crime will be a proportionable addition to his misery, his heart sinks within him at the alarming prospect; he becomes weary of existence, and he cries out, "it had been better for me that I had never been born." And in

the mean time he leads a life of terror and dismay.

He is *fearful* lest his evil inclinations should grow upon him ; and lest, after repeated defeats, he should become the helpless captive of a domineering vice. He is fearful lest his bad habits, which he has hitherto kept secret from the world, while he has maintained a fair character for morality, and even for sanctity, should, some time or other, be brought to light, and lest he should be exposed to disgrace and infamy.

The terrors of his mind beget *superstitious apprehensions*. He suspects that all nature is armed against him. He imagines an invisible arm continually stretched over him to disappoint his purposes, to baffle his designs, and to scatter curses upon his head. He sees a rock impending over him and ready to crush him to atoms. Or he imagines a sword suspended over him by a hair, and ready every instant to fall upon his head. Events of the most common occurrence are, in his estimation, judgments

from the Almighty. While he is awake his terrified imagination offers spectres to his view, and brings horrible sounds to his ears. When he is upon his bed he is scared with dreams and terrified with visions. He shuns society, for every countenance charges him with guilt. He is afraid of solitude, for he dare not encounter the pangs of self-reproach. How natural was the reflection of the brothers of Joseph, when he behaved harshly to them, upon their first introduction to him in Egypt. There was no apparent connexion between the ferocious language of an Egyptian despot, and a crime which they had committed twenty years before. But conscience instantly made the application. They could not forbear saying to one another, even in the presence of Joseph himself, whom they knew not, and of whom they could not suspect that he understood their language. "We are verily guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the anguish of his soul, when he besought us, and we

would not hear. Therefore is this distress come upon us."

A well instructed conscience also *anticipates the sentence* which will finally be pronounced upon unrepented guilt. It entertains no fond foolish hope that infinite mercy will overlook crime, or that any miracle will be wrought for the extermination of vicious and indulged habits. It is, indeed, a certain and glorious truth, that God will not always chide, neither will he keep his anger for ever. But a mind labouring under conscious guilt, having at the same time a clear discernment that it is in the established order of the divine government, that moral evil shall be eventually exterminated by natural evil, which is its only effectual remedy ; and being assured by the christian revelation that the wicked, equally with the righteous, shall be raised to life ; if such a mind is properly awakened to a sense of its condition, it feels an unhesitating conviction, that if he rises at all, he must rise the same individual that

he descended to the tomb: and if so, he will rise with all his bad habits and affections adhering to him, and, consequently, that he will rise to shame, and sorrow, and misery.

Nor will he be able to persuade himself that this suffering will either be *light* in degree or *short* in duration. Though he may not admit the vulgar conceptions of a local hell, or a material fire, he will plainly see, that with the most correct views, and the most rational expectations, enough remains to alarm the awakened offender to the utmost extent of his faculties and powers. He knows from consciousness how difficult it is to subdue one vicious habit. He feels that all he suffers from the tyranny of vicious affections now, that all his remorse, all the temporal inconvenience, all the disgrace, all the terrors which cleave to vicious habits in the present life, combined with the apprehensions of a life to come, are insufficient to separate him from his sinful courses, and to accomplish substantial and thorough reformation. What then

will he say, what will be the nature, the extent, or the degree of those sufferings in a future life, which will be found effectual to produce that entire and mighty transformation from vice to virtue, to exterminate this rooted depravity of heart, to renew my moral nature, and to restore me to holiness, to happiness, and to God. When he reflects upon the certainty, and the awful severity of divine judgments, his heart is overwhelmed, and he will assuredly find, and he knows it well, that it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

It may be added, that the keenest agonies of conscience arise from *reflection*.

In the hour of temptation and of dissipation conscience is forgotten, serious thought is excluded, and vice reigns with unresisted sway. Every expedient is devised to stop the remonstrances of the unwelcome monitor. And the effort not unfrequently succeeds. Conscience suspends her agency ; she is silent ; and there is a calm ; a fatal momentary calm, ominous

of an approaching tempest, which shakes
the wretched victim to his inmost center.

Oh treacherous Conscience ! while she seems to sleep
On rose and myrtle, lulled with Syren song,
While she seems nodding o'er her charge, and drops
On headlong appetite the slackened rein,
Unmark'd, as from behind her secret stand,
The sly observer minutes every fault,
And her dread diary with horror fills ;
In leaves more durable than leaves of brass,
Writes our whole history, which death shall read,
And judgment publish. Hear it now
While gentle its advice, its accent mild.

The facts which have been stated upon
this important subject may lead us to re-
mark,

First, That parents, and those who are
charged with the education of youth, *ought
not to be discouraged from instilling right prin-
ciples* into their minds, nor from inculcating
the indispensable necessity of forming vir-
tuous habits, and of leading a virtuous life,
even though for the present they appear to
themselves to labour in vain. They have
a friend in the bosoms of those whom they
thus wisely and piously instruct, which will
not suffer their doctrine to be lost, nor their

faithful admonitions to be as water spilled upon the ground. By enlightening the minds of young persons in moral truth, in the obligations to a virtuous practice, and in the awful sanctions of the christian religion, the rewards and punishments of a life to come, they are setting a vigilant monitor over the conduct of the rising generation, which will not fail to remonstrate when they deviate from the path of wisdom and virtue, and whose sharp, seasonable admonitions may, in the end, produce the desired effect, when the lips of early and faithful instructors shall be sealed in everlasting silence.

Finally, and above all things, secure a friend in an enlightened conscience.

Conscience is a man's best friend, or his worst enemy. Where it is an enemy, it is a bitter enemy, it is an enemy which haunts a man everywhere ; which he has no power to resist, and at whose mercy he perpetually lies. It is a flame kindled in his breast which inwardly torments and consumes him. It is a viper which twines about his

heart-strings, and stings him in the tenderest part. It is a hungry vulture, a never dying worm, which secretly preys upon his vitals, and fills him with agony and dismay. But where conscience is a friend, it is a friend indeed. It is a friend at home ; an inward, an intimate, a truly bosom friend. It is a friend at all times ; a friend that sticketh closer than a brother. It is a friend that will never desert us, even in the greatest extremity. Conscience is an invaluable friend ; far more so than any human friend. The friendship of conscience will compensate for the enmity of worlds. He that has a friend in his own heart, possesses the most solid ground of consolation and peace. In the midst of storms, encompassed with dangers, oppressed with sorrows, loaded with undeserved reproach, involved on all sides in impenetrable gloom, he still enjoys inward, unutterable peace and serenity of spirit, which the world knoweth not of, and conscious of integrity, his heart is at rest, trusting in God.



SERMON XVII.

THE SELF-EXISTENCE, THE ETERNITY, AND THE
IMMUTABILITY OF GOD.

EXODUS, iii. 14.

And God said to Moses, I AM THAT I AM. And he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.

THE great legislator of the Jews, having been trained up in all the learning, and in all the prejudices of the Egyptians, had been taught to believe that the Supreme Being had an appropriate name, and that the use of this name would be a sufficient warrant to demand the release of his countrymen from their cruel bondage. He asks, therefore, by what name he should designate the being whose commission he bore. God, in condescension to the infirmity of his servant, assumed to himself a name expressive of the immutability of his nature, of his

counsels, of his purposes, and of his promises. I AM THAT I AM; or, as the words might more literally be rendered, I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. The Septuagint version renders it the ESSENCE, or HE WHO IS. Thus shalt thou say to the children of Israel, The being WHO IS, WHO WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. He who claims existence as his sole prerogative, and in comparison with whom all other beings are less than nothing, and vanity, *I AM* hath sent me unto you. In other words, Declare to thine afflicted brethren, that it is I, the Lord of existence, the faithful, unchangeable God, the God of their fathers, the God whose promises are always accomplished to their utmost extent, who hath sent thee to announce that the season of their deliverance is fully come.

Without any further preface, I now proceed to the subject upon which I propose more immediately to treat in the present discourse, the SELF-EXISTENCE, the ETERNITY, and the IMMUTABILITY of God.

The first question which the inquisitive and serious mind anxiously desires to solve,

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is this, Whether there be a God. The second is of equal importance, and equally interesting, If there be a God, what is he? What are his attributes, and what his character? Is he a limited, or an unlimited being? Is he an all-benevolent governor, or an arbitrary and malignant tyrant?

The ATTRIBUTES of God are distinguished into *natural* and *moral*. The *natural* attributes of God are those which he possesses independently on his will. His *moral* attributes are the tendencies of his will to the production of good or evil, of happiness or misery.

Of the natural attributes of God, the primary and fundamental is self-existence. GOD IS A SELF-EXISTENT BEING.

SELF-EXISTENCE does not imply that God derived existence from himself, or that he is in any degree dependent upon his own will and power for the continuance of his being. This would be a contradiction in terms. Self-production is an effect absolutely inconceivable and impossible. When, therefore, it is affirmed that God is self-existent,

the meaning is, that he is absolutely independent, that he derived his existence from none, and that he depends upon no being whatever either as his cause or support.

It has been observed by some intelligent writers, that every being which exists has either a *cause*, or a *reason* for its existence. Of derived beings God is the proper and efficient cause, and the continual support. But of an ORIGINAL and independent being there can be no cause, and there needs no support. The *reason* why he exists is absolute necessity: so that it is a contradiction in nature that he should not exist. It is impossible for him not to *be*: or to be any other than what he is.

Great use has been made of this principle to prove the absolute perfection of God. God exists, it is said, by necessity. But necessity is *unlimited*. It is every where, and at all times the same. Therefore God is unlimited.

Again, Whatever attribute God possesses, he possesses in an unlimited degree, because he possesses it by *necessity*. But power is an

attribute of God, and therefore his power is unlimited, that is, God is omnipotent. By parity of reason, God being proved to be possessed of knowledge in a certain degree, and possessing it by necessity of nature, must therefore possess it in the highest possible degree: that is, God is omniscient. Also, if it be the attribute of God to occupy space and time, he must, by the necessity of his nature, occupy all space, and exist through all duration.

It has also been argued, that if God possesses any one attribute, in any imaginable degree, he must therefore possess *every possible* attribute in the *highest possible* degree: because necessity, being the reason of the divine existence, and being unlimited, there can be no reason why the Divine Being possesses any one attribute, in any one degree, which does not extend to the possession of every other perfection in its highest possible degree. Therefore, God is by necessity possessed of every possible perfection in the highest possible degree. That is, God is infinite.

It is further argued, that absolute necessity is but *one*. That there cannot be two, or more absolute necessities, any more than there can be two, or more infinite spaces : and consequently, that no more than one infinite being can exist ; that is, that God is one, and that more Gods than ONE is an impossibility, a contradiction in the very terms.

I believe that all this subtle reasoning is perfectly just, and that if we had a clear comprehension of the nature of necessity, and of the reason of the existence of a self-existent being, we should clearly see that it is impossible for him not to exist—that no more than ONE such being can exist—and that the one, ORIGINAL being, is the necessary subject of all possible perfections.

But who can by searching find out God ? Of the nature of self-existence it is impossible for us to form, I do not say an adequate, but any, even the faintest conception. Our own existence is derived and precarious : we have nothing analogous to self-existence in our frame and constitution. To argue

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the attributes of God from the mode of his existence, is therefore reasoning in the dark, it is wading far out of our depth.

One thing we know concerning self-existence—that it is the most excellent mode of being. All other modes of existence are derived, precarious, and dependent. They were given at first; and at the will of the donor they may be resumed. But self-existence is original, underived, independent, unprecarious existence. It seems reasonable, therefore, to ascribe to such a being every possible excellence.

It is an observation worthy of notice, that all *limitation* arises from some *external* cause. No being limits itself. If the question be asked concerning the globe which we inhabit, why it is not larger, more beautiful, or more populous than we now behold it? why the inhabitants are not more wise, more perfect, or more happy? The only answer which can with propriety be given is, that such was the will of the Creator. He gave birth to the universe, and called the inhabitants into being. He assigned the time and

place of their existence, the sphere of their activity, the extent of their powers, and the degree of perfection to which they should respectively attain. But who shall limit the power, the knowledge, or the benevolence of a self-existent being? or the sphere of his operation? A being absolutely independent must be absolutely uncircumscribed: in other words, a self-existent being must be INFINITE.

Concerning self-existence it is further observable, that the human mind cannot form any *positive conception* of it. It is unquestionably a positive quality, of the highest excellence, as really existing as power, knowledge, or benevolence. But it baffles all attempts to form any positive idea of it. For all our notions of intelligent beings are limited to those faculties which exist in ourselves and are known by consciousness. Whatever exists in the human mind which does not imply weakness, dependence, or guilt, we ascribe to the Supreme Being in the highest degree, and thus we form the best notion of God of

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which the human intellect is capable. Of these powers we can form a clear and distinct conception. But when we attempt to conceive of SELF-EXISTENCE, the mind labours and faints under the great idea. Our own faculties being all derived and precarious, we cannot form any positive notion of existence underived and original. Our idea of it is merely negative. We can say what it is *not*, but we cannot say what it *is*. We know that self-existence is not derived, is not dependent, is not precarious existence: that it never began: that it can never close: that it can suffer no change. But beyond this the human faculties do not extend. The God whom we adore is in this respect, and ever will remain, a GOD UNKNOWN, not only to beings of intellects so limited as mankind, but to all beings that exist, however exalted in dignity, or transcendent in excellence.

I add further, that self-existence is the grand INCOMMUNICABLE attribute of Deity, which elevates him to an infinite superiority over all created beings, how great and ex-

cellent soever. Of the existence of any rational beings in the universe, besides the human race, we have no distinct or certain knowledge. The fact, however, is highly probable. And it is not for such finite beings as we are to set limits to the power of God. And as it seems probable that excellence is progressive, and as there is ample room for infinite degrees of excellence between man and his Creator, it is not impossible that in the successions of infinite duration, a period may arrive when one who is now a frail, feeble, mortal human being, may become as much superior to the highest archangel, as the most exalted of created spirits now is to the infant of a day. There is, indeed, no possibility of limiting the power or the intelligence which God may not, if he pleases, communicate to his creatures. But there is one attribute which he can never communicate, and that is, SELF-EXISTENCE. God cannot make a creature independent of himself. The powers which he grants, he may at pleasure revoke : and the most exalted celestial spirit is as depen-

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dent upon his sovereign will as the feeblest insect of a day. He ALONE claims absolute independence as his inalienable right. This is the peculiar glory, the great prerogative of Deity, the glory that he will not, that he cannot give to another.

Life, death, and hell, and worlds unknown,
Hang on his firm decree.
He sits on no precarious throne,
Nor borrows leave to be.

Let it also be remembered, that it appears from the clearest evidence that this world, and by parity of reason all other worlds and systems, had a beginning of existence. We are sure, therefore, that the power and wisdom of God are competent to the formation, the preservation, and the government of this world, and of all things in it, and universally of all beings whatever, from the highest to the lowest, which begin to exist. Now this power is beyond all human comprehension, and this intelligence surpasses all human thought. But when we consider further, that this inconceivable power, this incomprehensible knowledge,

exists in the Supreme Being originally, independently, underived, and in the most absolute and perfect manner, it is almost impossible not to conclude that these attributes are in the strictest sense unlimited, and it seems most reasonable to ascribe to that being whose mode of existence is so transcendent, and whose attributes so far surpass all human thought and comprehension, every excellence which can possibly appertain to existence, and to conceive of him as possessing *every possible perfection in the highest possible degree.*

From the self-existence of the Supreme Being it clearly follows, that

GOD IS ETERNAL: or, in other words, that there never was a time when God was not; and there never will come a time when God shall cease to be.

For, if there ever was a time when God did not exist, he never could have existed at all. Original existence must necessarily be eternal existence. For it is as palpable a contradiction for an original being to arise

from nothing, as for a derived being to create itself.

And there never will come a time when he shall cease to be. God is from everlasting to everlasting. If we could comprehend the mode of the divine existence, we should no doubt see the necessity of its duration, and that it is an impossibility and a contradiction that a self-existent being should ever cease to exist. And, low and imperfect as our notions of self-existence are, yet from the idea of absolute independence we may certainly infer the permanence of the divine existence. For if God could cease to be, there must be a cause adequate to the effect, and upon that cause God must be dependent, and therefore could not be self-existent. The very idea, therefore, of the annihilation of a self-existent being is an absurdity, it is a contradiction in terms.

It must, however, be acknowledged, that great difficulties attend every notion that we can form of the ETERNITY of God. We

always conceive of eternity as indefinite duration, divided into two equal portions by the present instant ; the former of which, the eternity past, is continually receiving additions without any increase ; the latter, the eternity to come, is continually losing successive portions without any diminution. This is a plain contradiction. Again, if this notion of eternity were correct, it might reasonably be argued, that as one half of eternity is already past, every instant of which was once present, the remaining half might also pass away, and eternity itself come to an end : a conclusion than which nothing can be more absurd.

But these difficulties and apparent inconsistencies are entirely owing to the finiteness of human nature, and its utter incapacity to comprehend an infinite subject. And be it remembered that these difficulties are not peculiar to theism. The atheist, who maintains the eternity of an atom, is as open to objections from this quarter as the theist who believes in the eternity of God :

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and this in addition to all the objections which are peculiar to atheism as such.

In truth, our idea of duration is derived entirely from the succession of our own idea, and is identified with that succession. The quality, therefore, of successive duration cannot apply to a being, all whose ideas are at once present to his mind. Such a being is God. His perfect knowledge comprehends at one glance all things past, present, and to come, so that no new idea can ever enter into the divine mind, and no idea which ever existed there can be lost, or overlooked, or forgotten. To the Supreme Being, therefore, the notion of successive duration is very improperly applied. And many reflecting persons have judged, that the Supreme Being occupies eternity as he occupies space, that it is to him perpetually instantaneous—that things past, present, and to come, are equally co-existent in the divine mind, so that things which are not are as though they were.

He fills his own immortal NOW,
And sees our ages waste.

And this is very consonant to those representations of the eternity of God which are contained in the prophetic scriptures of the Old and New Testament, where the Supreme Being often represents himself as having actually performed that which was still future, and perhaps many ages distant; by which it is intended to represent the certainty, and his own clear and distinct foreknowledge of the event. In a similar manner our Lord interprets the declaration of God to Moses, as a proof of the resurrection of the dead: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living." Not that these venerable patriarchs were then alive. They had for ages been sleeping in their tomb. But God, foreseeing that at the destined period they would most certainly be released from the dark prison of the grave, regards this glorious event as actually present: in his view they are still living, for all live to him and in his decree; and therefore he is not ashamed to be called their God, as he

will ultimately, and at the destined period, fulfil his promise to the utmost extent, and not one iota of his good words shall fall to the ground. Thus it is, that in the sight of the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years is as one day.

We cannot, indeed, form any conception of a *perpetually instantaneous* eternity, any more than we can of self-existence, because we have nothing analogous to it in our own minds, for our own ideas being in a perpetual flux, our notions of duration are necessarily fleeting and successive.

From the eternal existence of God we certainly infer his *power of acting from eternity*.

Many think that the Supreme Being must necessarily have existed *alone*, from eternity, before it was in his power to create a world, or even an atom ; and they seem to imagine that he dwelt in a sort of solitary state, contemplating his own perfections, and delighting in himself, and in the foreknowledge of all the good which he had determined in the revolution of ages to

accomplish, but without communicating happiness to a single individual. This appears to me to be an unworthy representation of the greatest, the best of beings. If God existed from eternity, it must have been in his power to act from eternity : for his power being eternal, the exercise of it must by possibility be eternal, for a power which cannot be exercised is no power at all. And the difficulty of conceiving of an eternal production of power, is no greater than that of conceiving of the eternity of the divine existence. It amounts only to this, that a finite being cannot comprehend infinity. If, indeed, it were contended that any effect existed prior to its cause, the contradiction would be glaring. But that eternal power and wisdom should produce an eternal effect, can never be proved impossible. If God could not from all eternity have produced an effect, I would ask when that period of duration came that he acquired the power of exerting his original power, and how this great acquisition of power came into the possession of the su-

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preme immutable Spirit? Moreover, it is acknowledged, without dispute, that the purposes of God are the result of his counsels : also, that from all eternity, upon the prescience of all possible events, his wisdom fixed upon or decreed the production of that system which would be most worthy of himself, and which would comprehend the greatest sum of virtue and happiness. But if the decrees of God are co-existent with his counsels, then may the acts of his omnipotence be co-existent with his decrees, for the difficulty is no greater in one case than in the other.

No reasonable doubt, therefore, can exist that the Divine Being, if such had been his pleasure, might have exerted his power from eternity in the production of an infinite number and variety of effects : and though we have express revelation of the fact, and the speculation is beyond the reach of the human mind, yet when we take into consideration the infinite power and infinite benevolence of God, we can hardly hesitate to conclude that he began

to exert his goodness, and to communicate happiness, from the earliest date of duration, that is, from all eternity. And we can by no means reconcile ourselves to the thought, that an infinitely benevolent and active being should have existed from eternity in solitary state, without exerting one act of power, without communicating one particle of happiness.

From the SELF-EXISTENCE of God we also infer his *immutability*. For whatever God *is*, he is originally and independently. But if his essence, or his attributes, admitted *change*, he must to that extent depend upon the *cause* of that change, whether external or internal, and so far he would cease to be independent. Whatever, therefore, the Supreme Being now is, he always was, and ever will be the same—"the Father of Lights, without variableness or shadow of a change." "I am Jehovah," saith he, "I change not." The word Jehovah signifies existence or essence; it is used with great propriety through the Hebrew scriptures as the peculiar name of God. It implies that

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He is the only being who can be properly said to exist. He possesses an absolute plenitude of being. All other existence is derived, precarious, and dependent. But God is the being who IS.

The name which God assumes to himself in the burning bush, is equally expressive of the perfection of his existence and the immutability of his nature, his attributes, his purposes, and his promises. I AM THAT I AM, literally, I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE. "Go thou, and say to the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you." Exod. iii.

From all that has been said, we learn the INCOMPREHENSIBILITY of the Supreme Being.

God is great, and we know him not. And it is our duty at all times, and upon all occasions, to think and speak of him with the profoundest veneration and reverence. It is at the same time a source of exquisite satisfaction, amidst the vicissitudes of human affairs, the lapse of years, the waste of time, and the ravages of death, to



and the Immutability of God. 437

reflect that the being who presides over and governs all still lives, that his attributes and purposes are immutable, and that nothing can defeat the accomplishment of his wise and benevolent purposes. His counsel shall stand.



SERMON XVIII.

THE FALL OF BABYLON, THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF PROPHECY.

ISAIAH, xiii. 19.

*And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the
Chaldees' excellency, shall be as when God overthrew
Sodom and Gomorrha.*

OF the prophecies which are scattered through the books of the Old Testament, and which attest the divine authority of the mosaic institute, the next in point of precision and importance to those which relate to the Messiah, and to the events which should happen to the Jewish nation, are prophecies which announce the capture and the utter destruction of Babylon: the correspondence of which predictions with the events announced by them, it is my present purpose briefly to illustrate, and to point out some useful inferences which may be deduced from them.

If the detail of the event had been contained in the book which records the prediction, or if the narrative had been drawn up for the express purpose of illustrating the accomplishment of the prophecy, by some historian of the Hebrew nation, there might have been some room to suspect collusion, some plausible pretext to say, that the historian has given a colour to his facts, in order to support the credit of the prophecy, or that possibly the prediction was forged after the event.

In the present case, this objection is wholly precluded. The denunciations of the Jewish prophets were delivered long before the event. Jeremiah prophesied seventy years, and Isaiah two hundred years before Babylon was besieged: and the catastrophe which these prophets foretel was, at the time when they uttered the oracles, in the highest degree unlooked for and improbable. The historian of the event is Herodotus, the most ancient of the Greek historians, who had himself visited the spot, and Xenophon, the disciple and biographer

of Socrates, the most eminent of the Athenian philosophers, and a great general, who was also the friend and ally of the younger Cyrus, and who possessed the best means of information. And it is highly probable that neither of these historians had either seen or heard of the Hebrew prophecies, or would have thought them in any degree worthy of the slightest attention, although in their respective histories they relate the accomplishment of them almost to their minutest detail.

I propose to give a *succinct account* of the city of Babylon—to relate the history of its *fall*—to shew how completely and how literally the *Jewish prophecies were fulfilled* in this event—and to offer a few *reflections* upon the subject.

Babylon was the largest and the most magnificent city which ever existed. It was raised to its highest glory by Nebuchadnezzar, though its foundation was laid by one of his remote predecessors. From accounts transmitted by ancient historians, it appears to have occupied an immense

square, each side of which was eight miles in length, so that the area inclosed was sixty-four square miles. It was enclosed by a stupendous wall, which, some say, was two hundred feet in height, and fifty in breadth. The more moderate and probable computation is, that it was between seventy and eighty feet in height, and between thirty and forty in breadth. In this wall were one hundred gates of solid brass. The river Euphrates ran through the midst of the city, more than two fathoms in depth, and a quarter of a mile broad. It was embanked with very high and thick walls, to prevent it from overflowing the city. And at regular intervals were brazen gates, which opened to the river, and which at night were constantly shut and guarded. The celebrated *hanging gardens* of Babylon were formed by an immense artificial mount, elevated upon tiers of arches fifty cubits high. They were supported by twenty walls: they covered three acres and a half of ground, and were adorned with the loftiest trees, and with every species of

ornamental flowers and shrubs. The *temple of Belus* was a magnificent structure, which, for its astonishing magnitude, was reckoned one of the wonders of the ancient world, and was used partly for astronomical, and partly for idolatrous purposes. The wealth of it was so great, that when it was plundered by Xerxes, returning from his unsuccessful expedition into Greece, the spoil of it was computed to amount to upwards of twenty millions sterling.*

Such are the representations which historians of the best credit make of that stupendous city, which is described by the prophet as the glory of kingdoms, and the beauty of the Chaldees' excellency.

With regard to the decline and fall of this celebrated city, we are informed that Cyrus, king of Persia, after having carried on a war of twenty years with the successive emperors of Babylon, at last laid siege to the city itself, and blockaded it with a vast army of Medes, Persians, and their auxiliaries. The inhabitants, confiding in

* See Rennell's *Geography of Herodotus*.

the strength of their impregnable ramparts, and the immense supply of provisions with which the city was filled, scouted the attempt, and insulted the besiegers from the walls ; till Cyrus, having wasted two years before the city, and finding it impracticable to gain possession of it by the usual methods of war, devised a bold and unprecedented stratagem, which succeeded to his utmost wish and expectation. He caused a vast number of wide and deep trenches to be opened in the vicinity of the river ; and, on the evening of a great annual festival, when he knew that the inhabitants would be unsuspecting of danger, and immersed in riot and revelling, he turned the stream of the Euphrates into these trenches, and having thus made a fordable passage through the bed of the river, under the guidance of two noblemen, whom the tyranny of the king of Babylon had provoked to revolt, his troops were led on directly to the palace, the brazen gates of the river having been left open by the negligence of the guards, and cutting to

pieces the emperor's guards, who were taken by surprise, they slew the monarch himself, fighting valiantly amidst his nobles, and thus put an end to the dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar, and to the Babylonian empire. From this time Babylon ceased to be a royal residence, and declined from its glory more rapidly than it had advanced to it.

I shall now produce the solemn denunciations of the Jewish prophets against this magnificent city, and shall give those of Isaiah in the translation of Dr. Lowth, the late bishop of London, and those of Jeremiah, in the version of the late Dr. Blayney, professor of Arabic in the university of Oxford.

In the first place it is foretold, that Babylon shall be punished for her pride and cruelty, Isaiah, xlvii. 6, 8. "I was angry with my people, I profaned my inheritance, and I gave them up into their hand. Thou didst not show mercy unto them; even upon the aged thou didst grievously aggravate the weight of thy yoke. And

the Accomplishment of Prophecy. 445

thou saidst, I shall be a lady for ever, because thou didst not attentively consider these things. Thou didst not think on what was in the end to befall thee. But hear now this, O thou voluptuous city, thou that sittest in security. Thou that sayest in thy heart I am, and there is none else. I shall not sit a widow, I shall not know the loss of children. Yet shall these things come upon thee in a moment, the loss of children and widowhood, on a sudden shall they come upon thee."

The *nations are named* by which this great achievement would be effected. Isa. xiii. 17, 18. "Behold I raise up against them the Medes, who shall hold silver of no account, and as for gold they shall not delight in it; their bows shall dash the young men; their eye shall have no pity even on the children." Ch. xxi. 2. "The plunderer is plundered: the destroyer is destroyed. Go up, O Elam, i. e. Persia, form the siege, O Media." It is to be observed, that when Isaiah wrote his prophe-

cy, which was two hundred years before the event, Babylon was only rising to its glory, and the Medes and Persians were a very inconsiderable people, hardly known among the nations. They afterwards became a very warlike and powerful nation, celebrated for the number and the prowess of their cavalry, for their skill in archery, and for the size and strength of their brazen bows.*

That the Medes and Persians were to be the instruments of divine Providence, in the conquest and destruction of Babylon, is also repeatedly and explicitly foretold by the prophet Jeremiah, chap. l. and li.

This prophet also foretels, that a long war shall precede the capture and destruction of Babylon. Jer. li. 45, 46. "Go ye forth out of the midst of her, my people. And save ye every one his own life, because of the fierce anger of Jehovah. And lest your heart faint, and ye be afraid because of the rumour heard in the land; for

* See Xenophon's *Anab.* l. 3; *Cyrop.* l. 5.

the rumour shall come in a year; and in a year after that the rumour, and violence in the land, ruler against ruler."

The *very time* is fixed when the destruction of Babylon should take place; and the captivity of the Jews should cease. Jer. xxv. 11, 12. "And this whole land shall become a desolation and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years: And it shall come to pass when seventy years are accomplished, that I will visit upon the king of Babylon and upon his nation, saith Jehovah, their iniquity, and upon the land of Chaldea, and I will make it a perpetual desolation."

The prince, who was ordained to conduct the hostile armies against Babylon, is expressly named by the prophet Isaiah, a hundred and fifty years before he was born. Isaiah, xliv. 28; xlv. 1-4. "Who saith to Cyrus, Thou art my shepherd, and he shall fulfil all my pleasure. Who saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid. Thus

saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whom I hold fast by the right hand, that I may subdue nations before him, and ungird the loins of kings; I will go before thee and make the mountains level; the valves of brass will I break asunder, and the bars of irons will I hew down. That thou mayest know that I am Jehovah: he that calleth thee by thy name, the God of Israel. For the sake of my servant Jacob, and of Israel my chosen; I have even called thee by thy name; I have surnamed thee, though thou knowest me not."

It is foretold that the destruction of Babylon shall be *sudden and unexpected*. Jer. li. 8. "Babylon is suddenly fallen and broken." Isai. xlvii. 11. "Destruction shall come upon thee suddenly, of which thou shalt have no apprehension."

It is predicted that the city shall be taken by *stratagem*. Isai. l. 24. "I have laid a snare for thee, and thou hast also been caught, O Babylon, when thou wast not aware. Thou hast been met with and also taken by surprise, because thou hast con-

tended against Jehovah." Ch. li. 31, 32.
" Courier shall run to meet courier, and messenger to meet messenger, to acquaint the king of Babylon that his city is taken from end to end ; and the passages are surprised ; and the porches they have burned with fire ; and the men of war are stricken with terror."

It is further denounced that the city shall be taken by the *drying up of her river*. Jer. l. 38. " A sword is upon her waters, and they shall be dried up." Ch. li. 36. " Therefore, thus saith Jehovah, I will plead thy cause, and I will avenge thy wrongs ; and I will dry up her sea ; and I will make her springs dry."

It is foretold that Babylon should be captured during a season of *festivity and riot*. Jer. li. 39. " In their heat I will supply them with drink ; and I will make them drunk that they may exult, and sleep an everlasting sleep, and not awake again, saith Jehovah." Comp. v. 57, 58.

The astonishment, the horror, and the miserable fate of the cruel and perfidious

tyrant of this devoted city is portrayed by the prophet Isaiah in a sublime ode, chap. xiv., in which, by a bold and impressive prosopopœia, he represents Hades, or the Grave, under the image of a mighty monarch, summoning all the great and honourable ones of the earth to issue forth from the vast and gloomy receptacle of death, to meet and to upbraid the fallen despot. Ver. 9-11. "Hades from beneath is moved because of thee, to meet thee at thy coming. He rouses for thee the mighty dead, all the great chiefs of the earth; he makes to rise up from their thrones all the kings of the nations. All of them shall accost thee and shall say unto thee, Art thou, even thou too, become weak as we? Art thou made like unto us? Is then thy pride brought down to the grave? the sound of thy sprightly instruments? Is the vermin become thy couch? and the earth-worm thy covering?"

The prophet afterwards introduces a company of persons, who, having found the body of the king of Babylon mingled

among the heaps of the slain, and having with difficulty recognized his person, *insult over him with bitter taunts and invectives.*

Ver. 16-20. "Those that see thee shall look attentively at thee; they shall well consider thee: Is this the man that made the earth to tremble? that shook the kingdoms? that made the world like a desert? that destroyed cities? that never dismissed his captives to their home? All the kings of the nations, all of them lie down in glory, each in his own sepulchre, but thou art cast out of the grave as the tree abominated, as a trodden carcase, thou shalt not be joined to them in burial."

Lastly. It is predicted concerning Babylon, that the city should be *left desolate*. that it should be totally deserted by its inhabitants, that the ground upon which it stood should become a wild and dreary morass, frequented by loathsome, noxious, and venomous animals, and, finally, -that this vast, powerful, and magnificent city should be so completely exterminated, that the very situation of it should be forgotten.

Isaiah, xiii. 19-22. "And Babylon, she that was the beauty of kingdoms, the glory of the pride of the Chaldeans, shall become as the overthrow of Sodom and Gomorrha by the hand of God. It shall not be inhabited for ever, nor shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation ; neither shall the Arabian pitch his tent there ; neither shall the shepherds make their folds there. But there shall the wild beasts of the desert lodge ; and howling monsters shall fill their houses ; and there shall the daughters of the ostrich dwell ; and there shall the satyrs hold their revels. And wolves shall howl to one another in their palaces, and dragons in their voluptuous pavilions ; and her time is near to come, and her days shall not be prolonged."

Jer. li. 42-44. "*How is Babylon become an astonishment among the nations ! The sea is come up over Babylon ; with the multitude of its waves is she covered : Her cities are become a desolation, a land of drought, and a wilderness : no man shall dwell in them, neither shall a son of man pass through them.*

And I will execute judgment upon Bel in Babylon; and nations shall not flock to him any more. The wall also of Babylon is fallen." Isaiah, xiv. 22, 23. "*For I will arise against them, saith Jehovah, God of hosts, and I will cut off from Babylon the name and the remnant, and the son, and the son's son, saith Jehovah; and I will make it an inheritance for the porcupine and pools of water; and I will plunge it in the miry gulf of destruction, saith Jehovah God of hosts."*

This alarming denunciation of woe is ratified by a *solemn oath*. Isaiah, xiv. 24. "Jehovah God of hosts has sworn, saying, Surely as I have devised so shall it be, and as I have purposed that thing shall stand."

Nor is it possible that any prophecy could have been more literally, or more completely fulfilled, in every particular, than the denunciations of the Jewish prophets have been, and still are, in the catastrophe of this once haughty, magnificent, and oppressive city.

Cyrus having diverted the course of the

Euphrates in order to make himself master of the city, the river never returned back to its proper channel ; but overflowing the country more and more, the vicinity of Babylon gradually became a vast and unwholesome morass ; and the city itself, not being favoured by the kings of Persia, fell into decay. Darius Hystaspes, to punish the Babylonians for a revolt, lowered the walls of the city, took down its gates, and put many of the inhabitants to the sword. Xerxes having been disappointed in his invasion of Greece, wreaked his revenge upon Babylon, plundering and demolishing the temples of the idols, and thus fulfilling the prophecy, "I will punish Bel in Babylon." The cities of Seleucia and Ctesiphon being built in its vicinity, in situations more healthy and advantageous, drained Babylon of its inhabitants. Pausanias, who lived in the second century, relates, that "of Babylon, the greatest city which the sun ever saw, there was nothing remaining but the walls." Jerome, who lived in the fourth century, says, that the whole inclosure of

the walls of Babylon was actually converted into a chase for wild beasts, which were kept there for the diversion of the kings of Persia. Benjamin of Tudela, a Jewish traveller of the tenth century, reports, that in his time some walls were standing, but so full of venomous and noxious animals, that it was very dangerous to approach them. And at this day, so literally, so completely have the divine predictions been fulfilled, so totally has every fragment been swept away with the besom of destruction, that whatever probable conjectures may be formed, no vestige remains from which the modern traveller can with precision ascertain, that here once stood the magnificent city of Babylon, the glory of nations, and the pride of the whole earth.*

The prophecies concerning the fall of Babylon, in connexion with the events by which they were accomplished, suggest many useful REFLEXIONS.

* The ruins of this great and celebrated city have, of late years, been ascertained with tolerable accuracy. See Major Rennell's *Geography of Herodotus*, p. 350.

1. Hence we may infer the *certainty*, the *precision*, and the *extent* of the divine FORE-KNOWLEDGE.

In these prophecies a great number of events are foretold which depend upon the volitions of intelligent and moral agents : a prince is announced by name many years before his birth, as the conqueror of Babylon and the deliverer of Israel ; and the utter destruction and desolation of this great city was foretold two hundred years before the event, and at a time when the accomplishment of the prediction was in the highest degree improbable. What is the natural, inevitable conclusion, from facts of this nature so clearly established ? Surely this. That God sees the end from the beginning ; and from former times the things which are not yet done. That his all-comprehending view includes all events which are to come, as well as those which are present or passed. The foreknowledge of God is one of the brightest prerogatives of his divinity ; one of the most awful attributes of his nature. To deny it, is to rob

the Supreme Being of the glory of his perfections, and it involves a train of the most distressing consequences.

2. The prophecies of the Old Testament demonstrate the divine commission of those by whom they were delivered, and also the divine origin of the Jewish dispensation.

The prophecies announcing the fall of Babylon were delivered many years before the event, at a time when Babylon was in her glory, and when nothing was more improbable than the event foretold, and the predictions contain many circumstances which no human sagacity could have foreseen. We have also ample historical evidence that the event came to pass in exact conformity with the prediction. Part of the prophecy indeed, the total destruction of every remnant of that great city is accomplishing at this day ; and of the rest we have the unexceptionable testimony of two Greek historians, Herodotus and Xenophon, who were both in all probability ignorant, if not of the existence of the Jewish nation, at least of their sacred books,

and recorded prophecies. If we admit these facts, it is impossible to deny the conclusion that Isaiah and Jeremiah were inspired prophets. And as the object of their mission was to confirm the Jewish dispensation, and to reclaim the apostate Jews to the worship and service of the true Jehovah, as prescribed by the law of Moses, the argument from these prophecies in favour of the divine original of the Jewish Institute is irresistible.

3. We learn the interesting and momentous truth, that a wise, and powerful, and righteous Providence orders and governs the world.

We learn that there is a Providence exercised over the affairs of men, and that the world is not left to the direction of fate and chance. God is judge; he setteth up one and putteth down another. His providence extends, not only to nations and large communities, but to families and individuals. He calleth Cyrus by name, and girdeth him with strength, and employeth him as the instrument of fulfilling his great

designs, though Cyrus knoweth him not. It is equally easy to the Divine Mind, which pervades all nature, and is present in all worlds, to superintend the concerns of individuals, as well as those of nations and empires : nor are the former more beneath his notice than the latter ; for in his sight all nations are as the drop of the bucket, and the small dust of the balance.

We are likewise taught, by the review of these amazing transactions, to acknowledge the infinite wisdom of divine Providence, which is never at a loss for expedients to execute its purposes, and which, upon a full and comprehensive survey of all events which can possibly come to pass, invariably selects and brings to pass the fittest and the best.

The fall of Babylon, in connexion with the distinct prediction of that calamitous event, affords an affecting *display of the omnipotence* of God.

“ Is not this,” said the haughty monarch, “ is not this the great Babylon which I

have built for myself?" But how was his pride cast down in a moment, when the voice from heaven declared, "O king, thy glory is departed from thee." Nor could Babylon herself continue when her appointed hour was come. For what power can oppose the will of the Most High? Let the potsherds strive with the potsherds of the earth, but who ever hardened himself against God and prospered? His agency can render the meanest instrument efficacious for the production of the most extraordinary effects. Where the Almighty gives a commission, he supplies strength for the execution of the charge: and the feeblest agent shall be all-powerful in his hand. When Isaiah prophesied, no nations were of less account than the Medes and Persians, yet these were the people which God singles out by name to destroy the pride of Babylon. And in due time he summons them to the field: he arms their warriors: he commissions their captains: he leads them to the field, and he crowns

their enterprize with success. Thus does he hide pride from man, and thus when he judges he will overcome.

Hence, likewise, we learn the *righteousness of God*, and the *certainty and severity of the doom* which awaits the *impenitent and the incorrigible*.

Babylon goes on prosperously long after her fall was predicted, and the warrant had been issued for her destruction. . But the day of reckoning came at last, and every word of terror was literally fulfilled. Let nations which, like Babylon in the hour of her insolence, harden themselves in their iniquity, hear and tremble : and let them eschew her character, if they would escape her doom.

Further, the subject beautifully illustrates the *faithfulness and the goodness of God*. How safely, how cheerfully, may the humble and the pious rely upon his providence and his promises !

The despised Jews are carried captive by the tyrant of Babylon, they appear to be forsaken by God and man, the sport

signs, he counts their
sincere and deep rep
due time stand forth
A powerful prince s
fight their battles, an
or even knowing it, he
strument of divine P
their enemies, and to
country, to their tem
and their religion. A
prove to the humble
season of bitter distres
tion, earnestly implore
ration. He will not
Jacob, seek ye my face

4. Let us wait in the
faith and cheerful exm

prophecies of which it was the object, would naturally encourage the faith of the pious Jews, who were witnesses to that extraordinary event, in the future accomplishment of the prophecies which announced the advent of the Messiah, that great prophet whom Jehovah had promised to raise up like unto Moses, and of whom a general expectation prevailed, at the time and in the place of his appearance. And these prophecies have long since received their proper accomplishment. So also have many which were delivered by Christ and his apostles: those, in particular, which foretold the rapid and extensive propagation of the gospel, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and the early corruptions of the christian doctrine. We cannot desire a better foundation upon which to build our expectations of the eventual accomplishment, in their proper season, of those prophecies which relate to events that are still future.

There is a Babylon which still exists, a spiritual Babylon, which has, to many of

the servants of God and the advocates for truth, been a house of bondage and oppression. Against this Babylon woes are denounced, similar to those against the city which once bore that name. And these shall in due time be executed to their utmost extent, and in their severest import. Let us, then, look forward with joyful expectation to the period which is already fixed in the councils of Heaven, and is probably not very far distant, when Babylon the great, the mother of harlots and abominations, shall utterly fall, as a millstone cast into the sea, to rise no more. But let us, at the same time, remember that while we anticipate with delight the predicted extermination of the corruptions of Christianity, wherever they are found to exist, we mean no ill to the persons of those, who through unavoidable prepossessions, or from other causes, are entangled in them; and that we hold in the deepest abhorrence the too general practice of abridging civil rights upon no other pretence but their supposed religious error.

Again, it is declared, by the sure word of prophecy, that all the nations of the earth shall become the kingdoms of the Lord, and of his Messiah; and that when the fulness of the Gentiles is brought in, God will have respect to his ancient people, and all Israel shall be saved. Of the times and seasons when these glorious predictions shall be accomplished we have no knowledge; but that they will eventually be brought to pass in their largest and most glorious extent, we can entertain no doubt.

Hail, auspicious day, when Jesus shall take to himself his great power, and reign! When the just and equitable dominion of the Prince of Peace shall extend over the whole inhabited globe, and the knowledge of the Lord shall cover the earth, as the waters cover the seas! Hasten, O Lord, this triumphant period, and speedily accomplish the number of thine elect! Amen.

MATT. XXV

*And, lo ! I am with you always
world.*

THE great fact upon which
of Christianity rests, is
Jesus from the dead ;
Paul justly observes, if
then is our preaching vain
is also vain ; and they
asleep in Christ, relying
that the dead should rise
tality, are lost for ever.

BUT THE FIRST

Cessation of Miraculous Powers, &c. 467

the splendid miracle which is this day deservedly and joyfully commemorated by the whole christian church, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the day of Pentecost, the communication of miraculous gifts and powers to the apostles, and to the first teachers of the christian doctrine, by which they were amply qualified to preach the glad tidings of salvation faithfully, powerfully, and successfully through the world.

The resurrection of Jesus was a private miracle. And it may perhaps be admitted that the testimony of twelve competent witnesses, who could not be deceived themselves, and who could have no motive to impose upon others, would be sufficient to convince the wise, and to satisfy the unprejudiced and the impartial. But this, in the present case, was not enough. The attention of the multitude was to be roused, and in a manner compelled to the subject, and the obduracy of deeply-rooted and inveterate prejudice was to be overcome. It was not enough that here and there a philosopher became a proselyte, who might, by

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calm reasoning and persuasive eloquence, convert the few pupils who frequented their schools : it had been promised to the Messiah, as the reward of his sufferings (Isaiah, liii.), that by his doctrine he should justify many, and that many, *the many*, the mass of mankind, should be given to him as a portion. The great end of the mission of Christ could not be accomplished unless myriads were converted to the faith, and a nation born in a day. For the blessings of the gospel were to be extended to all mankind. None were excluded who were willing to accept the offered mercy. But *general* attention could only be excited by miracles such as the apostles and their first converts were empowered to perform. These were numerous and various : they were performed in public before thousands of witnesses : they could not be denied : they could not be called in question : and they were avowedly wrought in the name of Jesus, by power derived from him, and for the advancement of his religion. If these miracles were real facts, Jesus was alive.

The conclusion could not be resisted. It has, indeed, never been questioned. No man ever did or could believe in the existence of the apostolic miracles, and at the same time deny, or even doubt, that Jesus rose from the dead.

And the truth of this important fact, that the apostles performed miracles in the name of Jesus, and that they communicated miraculous powers to their immediate converts, is substantiated by evidence which, I do not hesitate to say, is as *strong*, or even *stronger* than that of any other fact upon historical record.

In the first place, we have *direct historical proof*, the testimony of competent and credible historians, who relate with the most artless simplicity what they themselves saw and heard, and whose testimony is unimpeachable. We have also what may properly be called *philosophical evidence* of the fact, arguing from the effect to the cause. The early, rapid, and extensive progress of the christian religion is a fact which cannot be disputed. It is attested

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For as the christian doctrine was hostile to all the prejudices, the habits, the passions, and the temporal interests of mankind, and as it was unsupported either by the civil or the military power, by the philosopher or the priest, no other way remains to account for this extraordinary fact, but that cause which Christians in all ages have uniformly assigned, and which their adversaries have never been able to disprove, the existence of miraculôus powers in the apostolic church. The hand of the Lord was with them, and therefore multitudes believed, and turned unto the Lord.

But we have *better evidence still*. The epistles of Paul, the genuineness of which has never been called in question, and which we may receive with as much credit as if we had actually seen the apostle write, or heard him speak. These epistles were addressed to those who had been converted by him from heathen idolatry or Jewish prejudice, to the christian faith, and who had once admired, revered, and loved him, as their spiritual father, their faithful, affec-

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tionate, and inspired instructor, but who had since been alienated from him, and prejudiced against him, who now entertained doubts of his apostolical authority, and had apostatized, if not from the profession, at least from the spirit of the gospel. In these epistles, the apostle explicitly and solemnly demands their attention, challenges their regard, and reclaims their affection. Now, upon what does he found these lofty claims? Upon a fact which, if it were not true, and notorious, and absolutely indisputable, would have exposed him to their most marked contempt, to their ineffable derision. He appeals to the miracles which he had himself performed, to the powers which he had himself communicated, powers which at the time he wrote they actually possessed, which they even misapplied, for the misapplication of which he severely reprimands them, and offers his grave advice concerning their future orderly employment of them. There is no escape from the conclusion that these powers actually existed in the church, but

one; and that is a supposition which has never yet been made: which the hardihood of infidelity has never yet ventured to insinuate: namely, that the apostle was insane, that he laboured under a mental hallucination, and that his disordered imagination suggested scenes which had no real existence. This, I say, is a supposition to which the most unblushing scepticism has never yet had recourse, and it is the only supposition upon which the denial of the apostle's testimony to the existence of supernatural gifts and powers in the primitive church can possibly stand. These powers, therefore, did exist in the manner, and to the degree stated by the writers of the New Testament, and therefore Christ, from whom they were derived, is risen from the dead, and the christian doctrine is true and divine.

This is an argument so plain and palpable, that in order to produce conviction it requires only to be fairly stated, and impartially considered by any one who is capable of forming a sound judgment of the



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value of historic evidence. That it does not universally convince those who profess to inquire, must be owing to indolence, indifference, inattention, or prejudice. Some, are determined to give no credit whatever to miracles of any kind, and will pay no attention to the evidence proposed. Others, are willing to take Christianity upon trust, but think their time may be better employed than in examining minutely into its evidence. They have occupations of more consequence truly, than to examine into the evidence of their immortal hopes. They are wise for this world, and they take their chance for the world to come.

Notwithstanding this, I hesitate not to assert, that of those who with common capacities fairly attend to the argument, it is impossible that any individual should remain unconvinced. The evidence is irresistible. It completely comes up to the terms of a late celebrated sceptic, intelligibly, though not very accurately expressed, namely, "that it would be a greater, i. e. a more incredible miracle, that the evidence

should be false, than that the miracle should be true."

It is a question of some importance to ascertain the time when miraculous powers ceased in the church, as the silence of ecclesiastical history on the one hand, and the pretensions of some communions to the continued possession of these powers on the other, have given occasion to unbelievers to throw out their sarcasms upon Christianity, and to discredit the existence of christian miracles altogether.

"Since every friend of revelation," says the late sceptical historian of the Roman empire (with his usual sarcastical sneer), "is persuaded of the reality, and every reasonable man is convinced of the cessation of miracles, it is evident there must have been some period when they were either suddenly or gradually withdrawn from the christian church. Whatever era is chosen for this purpose, the death of the apostles, the conversion of the Roman empire, or the extinction of the Arian heresy, the insensibility of the Christians who lived at that

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time will equally afford just matter of surprise."

The church of Rome pretends to the possession of miraculous powers, even to the present day, and upon this ground she prefers her claim to be the only true catholic and apostolic church: and could she make good her pretensions, her claim must be allowed without hesitation. Transubstantiation, indeed, as it is one of the deepest of mysteries, so, if it were possible, it would also be one of the greatest of miracles. But to prove that a morsel of bread is not transformed into the body and blood of Christ, by the incantation of the priest, is, I trust, upon the present occasion, a needless task.

The prevailing opinion among Protestants, till the middle of the last century, was, that miraculous powers continued in the church till the time of Constantine the Great, when the empire became christian.

"The gift of casting out devils," says archbishop Tillotson,* "continued the longest of any: and there was reason that it

* Tillotson's Works, vol. iii. p. 488, edit. 1755.

should continue as long as the devil reigned, and pagan idolatry was kept up. But when the powers of the world became christian, and Satan's kingdom was every where destroyed, then this miraculous gift also ceased."

The sound understanding of that great philosopher and judicious critic, Locke, discovered that the miraculous powers of the primitive Christians were not continued after the apostolic age. For he observes, that if they are believed to exist till the time of Constantine, there is no reason to stop there: for the writers of the succeeding centuries speak with no less assurance of the miracles in their time, than those of the second and third centuries: and it would be impossible to ascertain the time when miraculous powers were withdrawn.

In the middle of the last century, a man of great learning and freedom of thought,† not previously informed of Mr. Locke's opinion, undertook to prove that miraculous powers ceased with the apostolic age.

† Dr. Conyers Middleton.

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discharge of their ministry, his occasional appearances to them, and intercourse with them, and especially his presence with them by the holy spirit, by the communication of miraculous gifts and powers, which should continue with them to the end of that age, or dispensation, till the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, or as long as they lived. "I send," saith he, "the spirit of truth, which shall abide with you for ever," that is, as long as you live. And in confirmation of this interpretation it has been observed, that although we frequently hear of our Lord's personal appearance and intercourse with his disciples, antecedent to the capture and demolition of Jerusalem and the temple, no intercourse of that kind has been authentically established since that melancholy catastrophe.

It is also observable, and truly worthy of attention, that though many of the primitive disciples possessed miraculous powers in a very high degree, and were said to be full of the holy spirit, yet it appears that none possessed the power of *communicating*

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the holy spirit, but the apostles themselves. The church of Rome appears to have been planted by some eminent and zealous Christians who were not themselves apostles, perhaps by some who resorted to that great metropolis from Judea, who were possessed of miraculous powers, which they were permitted occasionally to exercise: and it is plain that their success was very considerable. But the Roman converts did *not* themselves possess these extraordinary powers, for the apostle, in writing to the church of Rome, expresses his earnest desire to visit them, and especially for this cause, that he might impart to them some spiritual gift: plainly intimating that this was a privilege which none but an apostle possessed, and thus claiming an authority equal to that of the very chief of the apostles.*

Agreeably to this state of the case, it is related of Philip, the deacon and evangelist, a person of great distinction in the church, next in order to the apostles, and full of the holy spirit, that he went down

* See Rom. i. 11, 12.

to Samaria, and preached Christ unto them, working many signal miracles, in consequence of which many were converted to the faith, and were baptized into the name of Jesus: among others, Simon the sorcerer, who had imposed upon the multitude by his juggling tricks, was himself converted and baptized. But this was all. It was not in the power of the evangelist to communicate to his new converts the gifts and powers which he himself possessed. But for this purpose two of the apostles, Peter and John, were deputed to visit the Samaritan converts, and to communicate spiritual gifts to them, which they accordingly did, by prayer and imposition of hands.

It being, then, so evident a fact, that the apostles only possessed the power of communicating spiritual gifts, it follows, of course, that after the decease of the apostles the holy spirit was no longer communicated, and that after the decease of those persons to whom miraculous powers had been imparted by the apostles, these powers would of course entirely cease. And this conclu-

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sion is confirmed, if not by the testimony, at least by the silence of ecclesiastical antiquity : for in the latter part of the first century, and in the beginning of the second, no claim is made to the possession of miraculous powers : though in the latter part of the second century, and in all that succeed, the pretension was revived, and increased in proportion as the number of converts was enlarged, and the necessity of miracles became less urgent. One of the most eminent and learned of the christian writers,* expressly states that miracles began with the preaching of Christ, that they were multiplied after his ascension, and then again decreased, but that even to his days some remains of them continued with a few, whose souls were cleansed by the word, and by a life conformable to it. "They drive away devils, they perform many cures, and they foresee things to come."

From this state of the evidence, it would appear hardly to admit a doubt, that miraculous powers ceased with the apostolic

* Origen.

age: that they no longer existed in the church when the apostles, and their immediate disciples, who received these gifts from the apostles, were dead. We have no reason to believe that the apostles left behind them any successors to the power of communicating the gifts of the holy spirit.

Nevertheless, in the middle of the second century, pretensions to miracles began to revive, and continued increasing through the third and following centuries; and these pretensions have been supported by evidence which has staggered many persons of learning and inquiry, who have been induced thereby to believe that the power of working miracles continued in the church for some centuries after the apostolic age: and have thus inadvertently furnished a plausible pretext for scepticism on the one hand, and for superstition on the other.

Justin Martyr was a Platonic philosopher who embraced Christianity, and defended the faith with considerable ability. He was a man of great integrity, who suffered martyrdom at the latter end of the second cen-

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tury. Though a professed philosopher, he was a real enthusiast. He first introduced the doctrine that the logos was a divine person emanating from God, the delegate of the Almighty in the creation and government of the world, and the medium of the divine dispensations to the Jewish nation. This new doctrine he labours to prove from the scriptures of the Old Testament, and he is so well satisfied with his grand discovery, that he conceives that it must have been revealed to him by inspiration. And truly no person who reads his miserable arguments will ever suspect that he acquired his notions from reasoning, nor will any reader of judgment believe, upon the credit of his assertions, that his interpretations are inspired. He also attests the contemporary existence of miraculous powers, and frequently appeals to what, he saith, "every one might see in every part of the world, in the case of persons possessed with demons, who were cured and set free, and the demons themselves were baffled, and driven away by Christians adjuring them in the

name of Jesus, 'when all others had tried in vain to help them.'*

Irenæus flourished some years later than Justin. He saith, " All who are true disciples of Christ work miracles in his name, for the good of mankind. Some cast out demons. Others heal the sick by imposition of hands. Even the dead have been raised, and lived many years among us."†

Tertullian, who wrote in the latter end of the second century, challenges the heathen magistrates " to call before their tribunal any person possessed with a demon ; and if the evil spirit, when adjured by any Christian whatever, did not own himself to be a demon, as plainly as in other places he would call himself a god, not daring to tell a lie to a Christian, that then they should take the life of that Christian."‡

Many similar testimonies might be cited. Notwithstanding which there is great reason to believe that these early writers were deluded by false representations, or that they

* Justin Martyr, Opp. † Irenæi Opp.

‡ Tertullian, Opp.

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were greatly mistaken in their judgment of facts, and that no miracles were actually performed after the apostolic age.

The early ecclesiastical writers who relate these miracles, do not pretend that they were themselves possessed of these miraculous powers. And yet it is allowed that they were the most eminent men of the age in which they lived; but if *they* were not thus privileged, it is not probable that persons of inferior note would be favoured with gifts which were denied to the wisest and the best men of the age.

Also, many of the early writers expressed themselves in a loose rhetorical manner, and did not expect to be understood in a strict literal sense.

Irenæus speaks of raising the dead as a miracle which occurred not unfrequently.* But he is the only writer who mentions this miracle; and he was certainly mistaken. The heathens sometimes challenged the Christians to produce a single person who had been raised from the dead, and

* Irenæi Opp.

they would become believers. But the Christians very prudently declined the challenge.

No pretension is made to the *gift of tongues*, though that was certainly the most necessary of the all miraculous powers to those who were to preach the gospel in foreign parts.

The miracle, upon which the greatest stress is always laid, is that of casting out demons. The ancient writers are unanimous in their testimony to these facts; that demons, when adjured in the name of Jesus, immediately came out of those who were possessed by them; that they dare not conceal the truth from a Christian, but confessed plainly that they were the real objects of popular worship, and under the names of Saturn, Jupiter, Apollo, and others, the gods of the heathen world.

But if we call to mind that insane persons were, in those days, vulgarly supposed to be possessed by demons, and that, in fact, neither demons, nor devils, had any concern in the case, we shall instantly see



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that all these traditions are erroneous in the extreme : or at least, that there was no miracle in the case. The poor wretches themselves, in the paroxysms of their disease, impressed with the prevailing belief of the country, imagined themselves to be really possessed, some by one, some by seven, and some by a whole legion of demons. And certainly, when one confessed that he was possessed by Apollo, and another that he was possessed by Saturn, it was no proof that the insanity was removed.

Insanity is a very mysterious complaint. Insane persons often possess great art and cunning, and know how to conceal their insanity, in many cases, so that it shall be very difficult to detect them. It is also known, that they who are conversant with them, and have the care of them, often acquire a great ascendancy over them. Now there can be no doubt that the christian exorcists were very skilful in the management of insane patients, and might, without much difficulty, make the multitude be-

lieve that they performed great cures. Upon these cases, therefore, no reliance whatever is to be placed, and, if these are taken away, the remaining claims to miraculous powers will be very much reduced, and easily defeated.

Finally. If upon the testimony of the writers of the second century, we admit the continuance, or rather the revival of miraculous powers, we ought, by parity of reason, upon the evidence of the writers of the third century, which is equally full and direct, to allow their existence in the third century, and so on to the fourth and fifth, nor will it be easy to find where to stop. It is best, therefore, to stop at once at the period to which we are led by evangelical testimony, confirmed by the silence of christian antiquity, that the apostles had no successors to the power of communicating spiritual gifts, and that of course miraculous powers ceased at the close of the apostolic age.

A question has been raised, whether any miracles have been wrought in favour of

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the christian religion, since the age of the apostles; and without the intervention of human agency. Some few cases have been cited to establish the affirmative. But they will not bear critical and impartial investigation, though the truth of these miracles has been warmly defended by many ingenious and learned advocates.

One of the most remarkable is that of the *Thundering Legion*. This legion consisted mostly of Christians; who are said by their prayers to have prevailed with the Almighty to pour down a torrent of rain upon the army of the emperor, Marcus Antoninus, which was surrounded by the enemy, and ready to perish by thirst; and, at the same time, to discharge upon the enemy a terrible tempest of thunder, and lightning, and hail, which confounded and alarmed them, and caused them to fall an easy prey to the Roman troops. Now, that the emperor's army was relieved when in great distress by a seasonable fall of rain, is by no means improbable; and that the same storm might fall more severely upon the

enemy is not unlikely ; and that the Romans, taking advantage of the storm, and of the superstitious terrors of their adversaries, might fall upon them, and defeat them, is no way wonderful. Nor is it at all extraordinary that, in a season of drought and danger, the Christians in the emperor's army might pray for rain ; as the heathen troops no doubt did to their false gods. But, though the kindness of divine Providence ought justly to be acknowledged upon this extraordinary occasion, there is no reason to believe that the interposition was miraculous.*

Eusebius relates, upon the authority of Constantine the Great himself, that that emperor was converted to the christian religion by the appearance of a luminous cross in the air, with this inscription, "UNDER THIS STANDARD THOU SHALT CONQUER." This was, no doubt, an artifice of the emperor to gain the confidence of the Christians, who were very numerous in his own army, and dishearten those who were en-

* See Moyle on the Thundering Legion.

listed under the banner of his rival. The artifice succeeded. Constantine won, and Maxentius lost the battle and the empire. Eusebius records the story as he received it from the emperor. And the pious bishop of Cesarea was much too good a courtier to call in question an anecdote which he had received from the emperor himself.

The most plausible legend of any that has been recorded since the age of the apostles, is that of the miracle, which is said to have been wrought, to defeat the attempt of the emperor Julian to rebuild the temple of Jerusalem. That philosophic, but superstitious emperor, who had once been a professor of Christianity, and a reader in the church, but who afterwards deserted his profession, and became a bitter enemy to the Christian faith, hoped to subvert the authority of Jesus, by counteracting his prophecy concerning the utter desolation of Jerusalem ; and, to this end, he formed a design to rebuild the city and the temple, and to restore the splendour of the Jewish worship. With this view he in-

vited Jews to return to their own country, and gave directions to one of his principal officers to superintend the rebuilding of that magnificent fabric. But, no sooner had they begun to prepare the foundation, than balls of fire burst out of the ground, which burned and destroyed the workmen. This dreadful prodigy being repeated as often as the attempt was renewed, the workmen were compelled to desist, and the emperor abandoned the undertaking.

This account does not rest upon the credit of christian writers only, though it cannot be denied that they added some marvellous circumstances to the tale. The fact is related by Ammianus Marcellinus, a heathen philosopher, the friend of the emperor Julian, his companion in the military expedition against the Parthians, and the historian of his reign. It has been believed by many learned moderns, who have thought the evidence quite sufficient to establish the fact, that the occasion called for a divine interposition to vindicate the character of the great prophet of the church,

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not have failed to mention it with triumph. And the heathen historian, perhaps, borrowed his account from rumours, which he did not think it necessary, or prudent, strictly to examine. And, perhaps, he was not indisposed to recommend himself and his work to the christian emperors who were successors of Julian. Upon the whole, therefore, it is highly probable, that the account of this famous miracle, though it possesses the best pretensions of any, is void of foundation, and that no miracle has ever been wrought in favour of the christian revelation since the apostolic age.

There is in the divine religion of Jesus, as it is exhibited in the records of the New Testament, a simplicity, an energy, a majesty, which at once irradiates the understanding and convinces the judgment, which captivates and rules the heart. It disdains the disgraceful support of fictitious miracles and pious frauds. It asks not the continuance even of those real and splendid displays of divine power which were necessary to its first introduction. Christianity stands

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alone. Under the protection of Divine Providence it has borne the shock, and weathered the storms of more than seventeen centuries. And it is now more deeply rooted than ever. It shall endure and flourish till the end of time; and revolving centuries shall but add to its beauty and its glory; till, in the end, its branches shall extend over the whole earth, and all the nations shall be gathered under its shadow. Hasten, O Lord, this glorious period. May thy kingdom come!

THE END.









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